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By

DOUGLAS NEWTON

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SOOKEY

CHAPTER I

Sookey was having a marked effect on Mister Roche. He was realizing her existence.

He was leaning over his counter peeking at her with his little eyes and his little mouth wide open. His unexpected and intense regard made Sookey hot behind the ears.

He said after a moment of wonder: "Lummy, if it ain't Young Sook!"

That was wet of him. As if she'd ever been anyone else but Young Sook. His next sentence explained his idiocy:

"Cor! me dear," said he. "Thought it was one o' them young leedies from th' Park."

Sookey guessed that Mister Roche was a liar; but an attractive liar. He knew well who she was, but the change in her had startled him. That was a triumph for the new dress and the new hair-dressing. It was a tribute, at last, to that strange, alien aloofness that had made her the outlander of Cherry Pie Gardens.

Cherry Pie Gardens scorned her unnatural sobriety in garments, here was Mister Roche, the expert, the "nob," approving.

Mister Roche's shop was suffocated with goods. Piles of goods, stacks of goods crowded every inch of space. Festoons of goods dripped down from the grey-black ceiling to meet pyramids of goods rising from the dark, cheesy mud of the floor boards. The disconsolate light that went by name of day in Goose Common became musty, mysterious, almost Oriental in the dimness between canyons of goods. Dim glints of tin pans and the glass and tinsel of carded lines shone in the dark depths like dusty jewels in a goblin's cave.

Mister Roche was the goblin.

Packages, tins, jars and cartons reared upward from his counter until only narrow black slits remained, with Mister Roche's face poking out of one slit—fat, pointed, twinkling, a plump weasel of a goblin.

His small, coffee-coloured eyes shone with a strange, shallow excitement as he looked at Sookey. The appetite in that look made her—who was fearless—uneasy. She knew he was suddenly seeing her as a "little piece of fluff," as a thing of beauty. She half hated him, half choked with the glory of it. Mister Roche was the acknowledged connoisseur of sex for the Cherry Pie area of Goose Common.

He didn't take her up sharp as usual, nor move easily portable articles out of her reach. He looked deep, licked his fattish, mulberry-coloured lips, breathed solidly through the pointed twitch of his nose, adopted his public-meeting style of talk.

"Well! Well! Well!" he murmured. "Who'd have thought it? Young Sook o' Cherry Pie. Who'd ha' thought looks like them 'ud a' come out o' such a place?"

His voice was a purr. He was leaning forward to find out how much of her long, round, thin legs remained on view. The glance passed upward from the neat, sharp ankles, taking all of her in as though hugging her. Then abruptly Mister Roche looked towards the dim, glassed and curtained door at the rear of the shop.

Behind that door "she" and her "gammy leg" perpetually lurked. He moved along to another slit in the goods on his counter, drawing Sookey along by a fell magnetism until a stack of "Prime, First-Class Jams" hid both from the door. Then he let his smile completely off the leash. He said:

"Well! Well! Well! You have growed up that pretty, me dear. Make me afraid o' you, you do."

That was absurd. Fear was not the emotion Mister Roche

felt for women—save for one woman. But there was no doubt about it, the new long skirt, the new shortening of the hair had marked Sookey's looks and doubled her age, as she had decisively known they would. For no other reason would the notorious Mister Roche treat her as one worthy of his serious and wicked advances.

Nevertheless, to cover up the emotions of elation and fright washing about in her chest, she said coldly and with scorn:

"'Am, pleese. Four parnds 'am. Two uv beevf!"

The recognized retort to that was: "Got yer money with yer?" It was Mister Roche's slogan. He had not dealt with Cherry Pie Gardens for thirty years for nothing. Sookey waited for it with hot longing. To-day she could say crushingly: "I 'as! An' it don't pay fer no fat nor no block ornaments, neither."

She felt balked and flustered when he said softly:

"Hair up, too. I say, you 'ave got a pretty neck, Sook."

Sookey sniffed and tossed the head with the hair up. It was her attempt to check the consuming pride that was beginning to dominate her fear and hostility. Hard to remain unmoved under the flattery of Mister Roche. Mister Roche was not 'arf of a toff, being on the Council and all. Mister Roche had an eye celebrated for its appreciation of attraction in women. To have Mister Roche a victim to her new charms, to feel his glance pawing her was the crowning wonder of her step into maturity. Satisfaction swelled her thin, strong, pretty throat, could scarcely be hid in her dark, bright eyes.

Yes, it was the triumph of triumphs. Bert Tavener, of the Gardens, had forgotten his nineteen-year-old aloofness at the sight of her this morning, and had shown a delicious desire to thump her. But Bert was a mere hobbledehoy beside Mister Roche, the master-appraiser of women.

"Yers, you're the pretty one, Sook," Mister Roche was

saying. "'Fore I knows where I am I'll be smashed on yer."

"'Abit o' yourn, ain't it," said Sookey with a scorn she did not feel.

"Only with the pretty ones," leered Mister Roche with a trained and disarming parry. "Four punds 'am, two o' bif, you sed?"

"Yer. An' keep yer little finger off the scales when yer weight it," said Sookey in a stout attempt to regain her moral supremacy.

"You can 'old me hand while I'm weighing," he smiled, "an' if er 'xtra hounce or so gets on, why I guess I'll be too 'appy ter notice."

Again defeated in the high art of retort, Sookey could only mutter: "An' four por' pies."

"Pawk pies—four," repeated Mister Roche, his faintly sandy brows lifting. "Party?"

"Buryin'!" cried Sookey, and this time she could not keep sheer pride from her voice.

"Buryin', eh? 'Ooo?"

"Farver!" Sookey's voice almost cracked in elation.

"Dear! Dear! Dear!" went Mister Roche's voice as he slid ham and beef on to a piece of newspaper and turned to look for pork pies. "Dear! Dear! Dear! You don't say. Sad! Well, you never know, do you? Pore Bill Roberts —so 'e's drawed *'is* Club Money. Dear! Dear! Dear! Never would a' thort it o' 'im. 'Owever did it 'appen?"

"Drand!" shrilled Sookey.

"Drownded!" cried Mister Roche. "Yor never tellin' me it was 'im they took art o' the canal?"

"Yes it was, then. 'E jumped right in off th' bridge be the 'Bandy Leg Walk.' Did it fer a dare. 'E bet Benny Smith a pint o' 'arf an' 'arf 'e c'd do it. An' so 'e did. . . . It took 'em a day'n 'arf to find the corp."

The wonder of the thing had led Sookey to forget her calm, and bubble the whole thing in shrill excitement. She knew that she was a celebrity, and meant to enjoy the condition to the full.

"Dear! Dear! Dear! Well I never," said Mister Roche. "Well, yer Ma'll know 'ow ter do the proper thing be 'im, I'll say that fer 'er. She buries 'usbands proud."

He clicked his teeth, his eyes lingering on the new blouse swelling over the small, firm breasts before wandering over the whole of her new clothes in a glance that could calculate to a penny the amount of Club Money the widow must have drawn from Bill Roberts's Burial Society. "Four pawk pies, now. . . . Any biskits? Nice new line o' biskits just come in."

" 'S'all," said Sookey. "An' let 'em be fresh."

"Th' freshest in th' house fer you, Sookey," said Mister Roche in his purring and refined accent. He came nimbly round the counter, his head cocked dreamily towards the dim heights of stock at the back of the shop. "Lemme see, where did I put that fresh lot wot come this morning?"

He was beside her, well out of range of the curtained door at the back, out of line of the front door. He knew the possibilities of his shop to an inch. He turned on her slowly, his smile bathing her in sleek power. His plump fingers caught and pressed her arm.

"Quite a little woman," he sighed. "Quite the tasty little woman now, eh, Sookey?"

Sookey was suffocated. She could not do a thing. She loathed and was swayed by him. Before she could rally her thrilled and affrighted senses he was away and muttering: "Pawk pies. . . . There you are." He darted at a shelf, seized a box, slipped behind his counter, and was the weasel goblin once more, leering at her with a sharp, shrewd, assessing and intimate leer.

He was putting the ham and beef and the pork pies into her string bag, his hand touching her, his smile stroking her.

"You're a fair knock-out, Sook me dear," he whispered. "A real clarssy bit o' goods, an' not 'arf. Pity yer've 'idden them pretty legs under them skirts, tho'."

"I'll trouble yer fer me change," said Sookey, her face a baffling mask.

"Pretty legs," he leered. "I likes 'em thin an' long."

"I likes 'em 'id," said Sookey. "Me change, *if* yer don't mind."

She was realizing by some vague intuition that she had the whip-hand of Mister Roche when he was like this.

"Suttenly. . . . Ten bob, wasn't it? . . . Silk stockin's on legs like that. Clarssy shoes to show up the ankles. A red plush frock. . . . Ever 'ankered arter a red plush frock, Sookey?"

Mister Roche had made his great mistake. Red plush jarred on Sookey. That queer taste of hers so contrary to Cherry Pie Garden standards told her that red plush was loathsome. Red plush freed her completely from the queer snake-like fascination Mister Roche exerted over her. She flared out:

"You keep yer red plush for yer latest Frizzy-lizzy—an' damwell give me me change."

"There y'are," said Mister Roche, handing over the money, and not in the slightest degree abashed. "Pleasure ter serve such a saucy piece o' goods. Ever go walkin' o' evenings be The Green?"

"I'll see I don't from to-day," she snapped.

"Bin eatin' vineager with a knife," he grinned. "I like spirit. Lemme see, 'ow old'll yer be now, Sook, eighteen or nineteen?"

"I'm as old as me tongue an' a little bit older than me

teeth," she jerked back from the door, and then she fully and defiantly gave a full exhibition of the former.

Thereupon Mister Roche was taken aback and disappointed. She was only a kid, after all. For all the strong maturity of her air and curves and her sharp, strong looks, she was probably no more than fourteen.

He was wrong. She was then fifteen and a half.

CHAPTER II

Sookey returned to Cherry Pie Gardens along the sluggishly swarming Rye Street. Here, pinched between walls of sheer plate-glass, far too many women crowded far too narrow pavements while they stared with brooding ecstasy at acreages of mixed millinery.

Sookey writhed through the crowd with the unconscious slickness of long habit. She clove ram-like through clusters of stout women who instinctively chose the most congested points to gather and discuss kids and mumps. She slid along gutters until that miraculous instant that separated omnibus wheels from her early death.

Now and then she stopped to look in a shop window. Those windows had a strange and irresistible fascination for her beyond, even, the fascination they exercised over the rest of her sex. Yet when she stopped it seemed merely to sneer.

Sookey of the slums had strange, fierce standards concerning windows, the methods of dressing them, the massing of articles, the blending of colours. None of these windows approached those standards. Indeed, in front of the most exclusive and expensive of the Goose Common drapers she wrinkled her strong, small nose in utter disgust and said "Gawd!" so loudly that the woman beside her jumped. The fool who had dressed that window had chosen two very beautiful and delicately shaded frocks to be the focus of eyes, quite unaware that the tints clashed.

Very few people were aware of it, but Sookey was, and so acutely that she felt her "back teeth on edge." This strangely acute eye was part of her queerness.

She passed the street of coster barrows, their refuse and

their stenches running down beside the Town Hall. She passed the Bethel-Doric façade of the Town Hall itself, and the elaborate Asylum that was Goose Common's idea of what was a fitting memorial to one of her most illustrious sons. She reached the Triangle, an open space devoted to ice-cream Johnnies and their barrows, cabs, three iron benches, and the front of the police station. From the Triangle Cherry Pie Gardens furtively led.

In the roadway on the Gardens side of the Triangle was a small two-seater car. In that car was a lanky youth, whose knees and the instrument board were incompatible. He was a boy with a long and bony face on which were set features so massive, gouged and ugly that they had a power and fascination that was extraordinary. Sookey knew that the boy and the car were the property of the "Doctor."

She knew that the doctor was down the Gardens, calling on Annie Stopes. Sookey did not then know the doctor's name—thought it was Geneste—but she knew that the lanky youth was the doctor's son.

She was both awed and contemptuous of this youth. She was awed by his immeasurable height above her, even more than by the strange force of his massive ugliness. She was contemptuous because he had none of the hardy vulgarities of the Gardens. He was well dressed. He wore a collar. He wore a hat instead of a cloth cap. He wore a waistcoat over his shirt. He looked too regularly washed. He talked in a way she and the Gardens considered mincing and affected.

As the more exalted classes have a fear of the workers, which they express through their contempt for the lack of aitches and good manners, so the workers have a fear of the more exalted, which they express through their contempt of too many aitches and too good manners. Both social grades consider that the virtues of the other make not at all the sort

of human beings for which Heaven originally constructed the world.

Sookey felt that Paul Geneste was unmanly and soft for these reasons—and additional ones of her own. These were mainly envy. She hated him for his opportunities of looking well dressed and well washed. She herself had what the Gardens considered an unnatural instinct for frequently scouring her skin. The thought that Paul Geneste probably had a real bath in a bath-room in his home, instead of having to resort to scrubbing by "penny numbers" in a tin bath when her mother and the family were out, or going, when she could "pinch" a few coppers, all the way to the Goose Common Public Baths and Washhouse, made her abominate him for his superior chances.

Staring at this creature with awe and abhorrence, Sookey realized with a shock that he was interested in her.

She knew at once that the new skirt and the hair up had led her to new wonders. This nineteen-year-old Toff of the Great World actually thought she was worth looking *at*, not *through*, as was the usual habit of the great ones of the Park. He was seeing her, and seeing her pretty. His eyes were as attentive if not as hungry as Mister Roche's.

Thrilled and uplifted, Sookey resolved on greater flights of glory. She would talk to this aristocrat as though she were his equal.

She went straight to him. She adopted the accent and voice her school teacher had always adopted towards visiting inspectors. With her acute ear and her sense of rightness, as mimetic as a parrot, she did it perfectly. She said:

"Pardon meh! Kan yew tell meh if I kan get intu Hardcastle Street that wey?"

She pointed down Cherry Pie Gardens, knowing it was a *cul-de-sac*.

The amazing happened. Paul Geneste went red and, in-

credible gesture, lifted his hat. He lifted his hat to Sookey of Cherry Pie Gardens, treating her exactly as though she were one of the magnificent creatures who lived in the Park's suburban villas. And he said:

"Sorry. I don't know if you can, but I do know that you shouldn't."

His eyes paid tribute to her looks, marked her individuality and the quiet distinction of her self-chosen frock. She opened her eyes as her teacher had always opened her eyes and said:

"Why, indeed not?"

Her queer, sure instinct told her at once that that "indeed" was wrongly placed. She saw that he felt it, too. But he said pleasantly:

"Well, it's not quite Buckingham Palace down there, you know. The people are a pretty rough lot—and tough. I'd try another way round if I were you, if only to avoid the filth."

She was torn between fury at his outlook on her friends and home and elation at having deceived him. She had always felt that she wasn't really different from the nobs, that, in fact, the thing that made her an alien in the Gardens was her likeness to the nobs. And she had been right. Here was the doctor's son taking her for one of his own class.

Paul Geneste thought her silence was hesitation. He said:

"Honestly, I wouldn't go down there. It's an awful hole, and the people are simply ghastly. . . ."

That, as Sookey told herself later, "tore it." Defence of her kind blazed out of her.

"We're dam well 's good as you," she cried. "'Oo'er you, you stuck-up ape? Wot do you think you are, you great, skinny, over-grown schoolboy. . . ."

Before Paul Geneste's astonished eyes this tall, neat, not unlady-like girl with the curiously strong and individual

beauty dissolved into a gutter-snipe; jeering, flaming, coarse-tongued.

He had not thought her quite as exalted as she had imagined, but he had felt she was a pretty girl from that stratum of terraced villas forming a buffer between the aristocracy of the Park and the brutishness of the slums. Now his ears told him from whence she really came. Yet even as she scorched him with her last highly indelicate jeers and swung away into Cherry Pie Gardens he could scarcely believe that she belonged to that pest hole.

There was a good poise in her strong, slim body, she moved extraordinarily well. She was also more than pretty. There was an individuality of looks in her short-featured, slightly Pan-like face. Her colouring was subtle and really fine. She seemed to carry a hall-mark of superior breeding. He resolved to cross-examine his father discreetly to find out what gentlefolk had come down so far in the world that they had to live and rear a family in Cherry Pie Gardens.

CHAPTER III

CHERRY PIE GARDENS is a drain in shape and odour leading from that Rue de la Paix of Goose Common, Rye Street, to a blank piece of ground where "Brandy" Mary the trollop was "done in."

Once Cherry Pie Gardens had been what its name implies, a row of decent country cottages at the edge of a cherry orchard.

Living people could remember it thus, though every time they looked at the squalor into which it had descended they wondered if, after all, memory wasn't a lie. But it had been so. There were even human beings under sixty who could point to where there had been hedges and much grass, fields under plough, and other orchards—pear, plum, apple—in the days when Goose Common and they had been younger. Cherry Pie Gardens had been the show place of a pretty village at that time. The younger generation was inclined to think their grandparents unconvincing liars when they spoke in this manner. They were not old enough to appreciate the swift marvels of change wrought by our era of Progress.

There were no cherries in the Gardens now, save those the owners of fruit barrows kept in storage under their beds at night. There were no gardens, either, while the cottages were no longer cottages, but plague spots on the town surveyor's conscience. They ought to have been swept away years ago, possibly by a fierce, complete and cleansing fire.

On one side of the narrow, festering alley were the cottages. They had been decaying visibly and obscenely for the last thirty years. They were fronted in some spots by patches of broken iron railings. These were mementoes of an odd

moment of craft and conscience in which the landlord had endeavoured to replace vanished wooden palings by material unsuitable for firewood. Between these railings, or the place where railings should be, and the cottages was a strip of black earth one yard and three-quarters across. This strip had once been the front gardens of the cottages. Now it served as dust-bin or veranda, as the need arose.

The cottages were structures of from three to five rooms. Each room held at the least one and at the most four families. Some of the families took in lodgers. All families had the habit of excess in children. The Gardens at least flourished in human weeds.

Facing the cottages across a five-yard roadway of cobbles was the long, blank wall of Goose Common police station. This wall rose so high that the sun had no excuse whatever for touching the intrinsic filth of the roadway. It was therefore always dank and of a peculiar tenacious blackness, where not decorated with vegetable, paper or other refuse, and tin cans.

Dogs, blowsy women and a mob of children added themselves to the more inanimate garbage of the road. There were also barrows. Many of the leading citizens of the Gardens were hawkers specializing in those foodstuffs which suburban housekeepers—unconscious of the rich, germy atmosphere of the Gardens—bought with the jubilation villa human nature feels over bargains.

Sookey passed down the centre of this rialto of degeneration, dodging the larger children and pushing the smaller aside with instinctive unconcern. A group of young noblemen fishing through a drain-grating mentioned loudly that "Young Sook was swanking in 'er muvver's cut-down chemise." They kept a wary eye on her as they chanted, but Sookey was not even goaded into a grimace.

She was inured to the local custom of slinging the mouth.

She knew that this instinctive hostility for anything novel would not go beyond taunts. Years ago she had cured the younger mammalia of the Gardens of all desire for active interference in her abnormalities.

This had been when she had adopted the vice of washing her face, hands *and* neck daily.

Youth feminine and, particularly, male had resented that outrage on tradition. Sookey, if she had been a true daughter of the Gardens, would have resented it too. But that something fundamentally alien had urged the excess. With her strange and queerly sure instinct for what was right she had noted the bewildering effect of well-scoured skin in certain little girls at her Council School. At once her inexplicable intuition told her that washing was a thing one ought to do. She had washed.

Firmly and habitually she had washed from that time onward. It caused uneasiness. Bill Roberts, her father, thought, at first, she must be sickening for something. As the trait persisted he would have objected, as Sookey's brothers and sisters had objected, and Sookey would have felt his belt-end. Her mother, however, had unexpectedly come to her aid.

Old Sookey did strange and startling things like that. Old Sookey had an uncanny gift for going contrary to the sun. Suddenly stirring from her immense calm, Old Sookey had bade Bill Roberts "Shut his trap an' leave the gel alone." And Old Sookey, the mysterious, the baffling but all powerful, had had her way.

She had, however, looked at Young Sookey with her hooded eyes, a strange look, and she had muttered: "Lummy, 'oo'd a' thought it—coming out like that."

It was years before Young Sookey understood the significance of her mother's remark.

Old Sookey's might did not extend to the younger generation of the Gardens, and if washing had disturbed her family it revolted them.

The first time Young Sookey's face was clean it was regarded as an accident unavoidable by youth. When it became apparent that cleanliness was not a passing tyranny of parents but a permanency, jeers and cat-calls became Sookey's lot. These passed to physical hostility. Small boys made it an ambition to register protest on that immaculate face with any bit of garbage, preferably a bad tomato, to be found in the gutter. Big girls pulled her hair and pushed her about. Big boys thumped her.

It was part of her strangeness that she waited on her own moment for retaliation, and chose the right subject for demonstration.

She chose Alf Naylor, a tall, shambling, bullying youth, feared for his strength and cruelty; and she chose Sunday after dinner when the Gardens was thronged.

Alf had taken her thin arm, twisted it and done his best to modify her too blooming complexion with a *passé* cauliflower. Before the cauliflower could touch her Alf Naylor was fighting hard for his reputation as a super-man.

Wiry, over-tall, mature for her age, inured to the savagery of her tribe, fiercely nervous and full of passion, Sookey had whipped round on the big lout like a spitting cat. She drove her knee furiously into his stomach, while her free hand clawed his face with a pitiless knowledge of what good nails can do.

Alf tried to grab her hair, missed, and Sookey used her nails again. He let go, shoving her away, hoping that she would bolt, leaving him victor. She did not run. She went at him as though she meant to kill him. Her dark eyes flamed so furiously that he was actually frightened out of his life.

He backed, thrusting his big hand against her face to hold her off while he bashed her one. Her teeth immediately met in the side of his palm, while her one boot that had a workmanlike toe-cap landed with terrific force on his knee. He almost fell with the pain, but she gave him no relief. He was enveloped by her fury. Her nails scored his face, tore at his throat. She had him by his hair and was bashing his head against the police station wall. It was like fighting a mad monkey. Whatever instinct of self-defence Alf had was swept away by the passion of her assault. Panic swept over him. He cowered, saw his chance—and bolted.

He bolted as no male had ever bolted from female in the annals of the Gardens, for Sookey was after him. She meant to make her one example final, and she did. She chased the lout along the Gardens through the crowds of awed children and jeering women. It was only when he ran into The Triangle and took refuge behind the policeman on point duty at the door of the station that she stopped pursuit.

She had accomplished her end. From that day she was left severely alone, no matter what strange freak of fancy she chose to indulge.

Sookey now walked down the Gardens knowing that hostility dare not go beyond jeering.

Even the women were a little afraid of her, afraid with the resentment felt by aborigines for the alien and his habits. Even though she was not yet sixteen she had the reputation of being "a queer little slut." She was "strange-like," a changeling in that unhealthy breeding-ground. Women, now gathered in groups, looked at her with surly eyes, wondered where she got her ways from, her looks, her aloofness, her irritating sense of individuality.

Some of it came from Old Sookey, of course, for Old Sookey was a "gyppo." But gipsies are notoriously antagonistic to soap and water, so it could not be all Old Sookey.

Some force deeper and more mysterious was responsible for this unnaturalness in Young Sookey.

"An' it's not from no one in th' Gardens, neither," one woman said with a dark look.

"No, ner in Goose Comm'n, ner anywheres this side uv the river," a bolder one hinted, and those who could went on to tell how Old Sookey had been a very flash piece of goods in her young days, and pretty, too, and how it was current knowledge that she had got more out of "service" as maid in smell West End houses than wages. "Them days o' service could tell you a lot about Young Sook, not 'arf, if you only knew," the women agreed, and all told again what all already knew, how Old Sook in her late teens had "taken up with," married, and had children by a local celebrity named Frank Piles, before and in the intervals of her service in the West End.

The way the women turned and looked at her as she came down the Gardens after her encounter with Paul Geneste told Sookey that something was the matter, that there was more than the joy of a local burying in the air. Something had happened in that cottage with the drawn blinds to fill them with heady anticipation of drama.

The women nudged each other as she approached the house, and Miriam Jones, the half-Sheeny, turned her big hawk-face leering with the pleasures of malice. She called stridently:

" 'Ere, you Sook. You get erlong in 'ome sharp. Yer farver's come an' 'e's beating up yer widowed Ma crool."

CHAPTER IV

IMMEDIATELY inside the door of Sookey's house was the room which had once been the cottage parlour. In most of the cottages this was practically the entire home of a family. In this house the kitchen behind had been turned into a bedroom, and there was a scullery beyond.

Sookey's mother, Old Sookey, sat in the parlour in enormous calm. Her fat hands were splayed on her tremendous knees. Her thin bust reared unnaturally above terrific hips. Her prematurely old face was set and stoic. Her prune-black eyes were fixed and stagnant of emotion.

Those eyes were aligned upon rather than staring at a reedy and furtive man. This man was new to Sookey, and she hated him at once. There was something stinkingly unpleasant about him, as her mind felt it. It was a good description—only to look at him was to be conscious of a definite moral rottenness. It came, perhaps, from his air of seedy sprightliness, a sense of fighting off early senile collapse not too successfully.

His smooth, ferret face had a grey, burnt-out look. A dyed rat-tail moustache and bright cobalt eyes seemed to strive to keep up a pretence of false and horrible youth. His clothes were light and striking, but their greasy flashiness was merely unusual in those surroundings. His collar was linen in a world of spotted chokers, for example, but it was filthy. His figure was held in a manner to suggest that he was master of the situation had he not been so obviously afraid of Old Sookey.

Sookey waited at the door watching the pair. That this man was her father, as Yiddisher Miriam had declared, meant

nothing to her. Her official father was back in the scullery in his coffin, with the bottled beer for the burying cooling under it.

As she came in the man was saying:

"That's wot I'm arskin'. Am I yer lorful wedded 'usban' or aren't I not? That's all I ark."

He had an air of being reasonable but firm. Sookey's mother did not stir, did not speak. One could not even imagine her capable of speech. Her ruthless silence unnerved the man.

"I'm arskin' a straight question an' I wants a straight answer," he insisted. "Am I or aren't I not yor lorful wedded 'usban'?"

Old Sookey did not even breathe heavily.

"Yer knows it," went on the man. "I am yor 'usban'. The lor's the lor. I 'as me rights as yor lorful, legal 'usban', see."

Old Sookey neither saw nor stirred.

"Yer carn't get awiy from it—I mean th' lor—can yer? Well, there yer are then, I claims me rights."

Old Sookey stirred faintly in her mighty calm. She uttered a word—just one word, terrible and unprintable. It summed up Herbert Young and his vile profession with hideous artistry.

"That's neither 'ere nor there," the man shouted as though beating down a torrent of protest. "Wot I says, an' wot I insis', is that I'm yor lorful 'usban', no more nor no less, an' as such I 'as me legal rights, an' I demand 'em."

"Not a fardin' d'yer get o' Bill's Club Money," said Old Sookey with Olympian calm. "Not a ruddy tinker's-cuss."

"Neither 'ere nor there," snarled the man. "It's wot the lor siys. . . ."

Old Sookey swung her slow eyes on her daughter.

"Look at 'im," she said in a cold, dead voice. "Look at

that skunk! Look at the mangy dawg! Deserted me ten years ago, me with a young family an' twins at th' breast. 'E didn't care wot 'appened. Not 'e. Lef' me in th' muck. Nar e' comes snifflin' back the moment 'is rat nose smells burial money. Wot clarss that fer a man?"

"I gotter right to come. As yer legal 'usban'. . . ."

"A slimy toad, that's wot 'e is," said the passionless woman. "An' on the very burial day. But I knows 'im. Not a fardin' will 'e as much as smell. An' that's gorspel."

A film of genuine disgust spread over her graven face. The appearance of such a husband at the very moment she was burying another seemed to be the limit of bad taste. His rights were outrages. His excuse that she had married him before she became the mate of Bill Roberts was, to her, the very depth of trivial meanness. Besides, she knew all about him and his rights. He wouldn't have remembered them if Bill Roberts hadn't been a saving man in the matter of Club Money. Herbert Young always had a sharp nose for cash he didn't have to work for. Well, she knew how to deal with the likes of Herbert Young.

Old Sookey possessed a deep and dangerous fire under her colossal calm. She was really shocked at the moral depravity of Herbert Young, for it was her boast that she buried husbands proud, and to bury husbands proud meant the spending of all his insurance on the funeral.

Bill had been a reasonably steady earner as a plumber-burglar. His legitimate pay had been good and his thefts profitable without being flashy. Bill had known how to dispose of brass taps and other minor metal from empty or unguarded houses in a way that few could equal. Under the thumb of Old Sookey he had been a model husband, as Cherry Pie Gardens understood that indefinite position. He had been a fairly satisfactory father to a motley gang of children, mainly not his own, and even in drink had never quarrelled

with the lodgers in the three rooms upstairs in a way to jeopardize that source of income.

And satisfactory in life he had been in death glorious. His name and inquest would appear in all those papers which added the charms of murder, adultery, seduction, crime and suicide to the Sabbath calm. No doubt but that Bill dead was a celebrity. The coroner had made a speech over Bill's corpse—mainly condemnatory, but certainly a speech, and it would be reported because the coroner had been scathing about the acts of drunkards.

It was a notable death, and it was plain that all honour should be paid to it. To have this corpse-worm Herbert Young interrupting and marring the solemn harmony was more than human nature could stand. Since Old Sookey was not in the habit of standing much her attitude was decisive.

"Sling yer 'ook," she said abruptly in a voice that fell in its intensity rather than rose. "D'yer 'ear? If yer don't want ter be pinched, 'op it, lively."

"Don't you take none o' that tone ter me," shouted Herbert Young, feeling more natural in an atmosphere of strife. "I ain't ter be threatened, no, ner bullied. . . ."

"Save yer breath fer the coppers," said Old Sookey with rock-like calm. "You'll need it, arter all I tell 'em abart yer."

"Perlice," said the man on a frightened hiss. Then: "Call 'em, yer ole 'ag. I'll tell 'em I'm yor lorful 'usban'."

"One of 'em," said the calm, iron voice. "And *not* the first."

"Yer lorful 'usban'," cried Herbert Young on a dwindling bleat. "An' as such. . . ."

"There was Frank Piles afore *you*," went on Old Sookey with cold venom. It was common knowledge that if the redoubtable Mr. Francis Piles was absent it was through no

lack in the charms of his wife. Frank Piles was doing a "lifer" for manslaughter.

Herbert Young swore with a feeble foulness. Then:

"It's bigamy, then——"

"You've always knowed it," jeered Old Sookey. "Didn't yer take me to Gravesend ter be spliced 'cos you'd a' got jugged 'ere?"

More than ever Herbert Young was a rat, a cornered rat. His flaccid face gleamed vilely. Sookey, who was not in the least disturbed by his foul language, his fury or the knowledge of her mother's past, detested him for the abomination of his looks. She said fiercely:

"Jim's at the Crooked Billet, Ma. Shall I fetch 'im."

Jim was her eighteen-year-old step-brother. He was the son of Frank Piles, and the violence of his father's blood was undoubtedly in him. He was a fish porter at Billingsgate, so that he had the muscles to balance his quarrelsome nature.

" 'E's coming," said Old Sookey. "Yer brother Ivor is fetchin' 'im."

Sookey had drawn Herbert Young's glance. His bright, shallow eyes were examining her with ghastly attention. It was a regard more cold, more expert, and more unpleasant than Mister Roche's. Herbert Young's gaze not only measured her from head to foot, but seemed to value every one of her limbs. He licked his lips, said abruptly:

"That's my brat."

"Get outter 'ere, d'yer 'ear," said Old Sookey, suddenly vicious.

"That's my gel," he said.

"She ain't. You going to sling it?"

"She is, then. You called 'er Sookey. That was the one born arter I married yer."

"Five months arter," jeered Old Sookey with cold irony.

"That don't matter. Be the lor she's mine."

"Damn yer lor," the old woman said with a sudden ugly violence. "If yer don't clear out at onct I'll get yer put away, s'welk me."

Herbert Young cringed but persisted: "It's lor all right, mine's mine, an' I 'as fer the arskin'."

Old Sookey looked at her daughter, looked at Herbert Young. The glance was pointed, and she sneered with unfathomable scorn: "Think the likes o' you c'd a' fathered a gel like 'er?"

Some queer force of desire was making Herbert Young tenacious beyond his fear. He said:

"She's mine an' I claims 'er. Say what you like, you ole 'arlot, I'm agoing to 'ave 'er—*see!*" Old Sookey seemed to know the power that stiffened him, knew that this made him really dangerous. Her eyes began to blaze with a monstrous, cold passion.

"*You* 'ave 'er," she said viciously. "*You!* You just try an' take 'er, an' see wot I put across yer."

The man snapped his fingers in her face.

"I'll 'ave 'er," he spat. "You ain't going to stop me this time. She's mine, see, an' I ain't givin' 'er up."

Old Sookey became more terrible, she became soft, quiet; she said with a curious packed evenness:

"So that's 'ow it is, 'Erbert Young. Well, then, I'd better 'ave a word or two with the inspector over there," her head jerked towards the police station, "about the Priory Park servant gel wot you sent to such a good situation in South America. Yers, an' the music-'all girls you got a job for in Barcelony, Spain. Wot d'gyer think the inspector will say to that, 'Erbert?"

The man fell back as though seeing sudden death, his face took on a green blotch. He gasped thickly: "You liar, you ruddy ole liar. You know there ain't anything agin me."

. . . He stopped under the relentless sneer of the cold, black eyes. As he choked to silence, Old Sookey said:

"That's right, 'Erbert, there ain't anything agin you—till I talk."

"Don't you be a ole fool, Sookey," he stuttered thickly.

"I ain't so old, an' I never was a fool, 'Erbert," she said with her slow calm. "You knows it. I got all the fac's o' them bits o' business, *and* some others. I c'n keep me mouth shut as well as anybody, but you just as much as crooks yer finger t'wards this gel 'ere an' see wot 'appens to you, 'Erbert Young."

"You—you dursen't do it," he snivelled.

"You know," she said implacably. "Now, 'op it. Me son Jim'll be down the Gardens any minnit an' we don't want two buryin's 'ere. Git!"

Herbert Young went away at once. Young Sookey had never seen a man so afraid. Yet his eyes swung on her as he went, appraising every detail of her face and figure. In spite of his fear he did that, and she felt sick under his look.

And under the eyes of her mother, too.

Herbert Young's desire to have her seemed to have concentrated Old Sookey's thoughts on her. Her eyes rested on the girl constantly throughout the celebration of Bill's funeral. It was a butcher's glance—but more than a butcher's. It was the same cold, ugly stripping and appraisal of flesh as Herbert Young's.

CHAPTER V

Sookey was not shocked or horrified by anything in the interview between Herbert Young and her mother. Neither was she ignorant of the facts underlying it.

She was not in a walk of life to enjoy ignorance. She had been bred in a slum. In that overcrowded, frequently criminal, loose, and always unreticent life she habitually heard, saw, and accepted with indifference things that would have revolted girls of gentler nurture.

The facts of the life about her were shocking and ugly, but she did not think them so. She had yet to be given her chance for learning better.

Where she should have shrunk in horror at the evil intentions both Herbert Young and her mother seemed to have for her, she did not shrink. Such designs were not unique in her experience. But if she was not affronted she was certainly rebellious.

If she could not view these matters from the angle of ordinary morality, that curious fastidiousness of hers was up in arms against the ugliness of such a future. And not only did her fastidiousness revolt, but her strong individuality flamed into rebellion also. She objected with all the force of her decisive will to being sacrificed merely that her mother, or anyone else, should benefit.

She saw that Old Sookey was planning to make profit out of her. Old Sookey was facing an economic crisis.

Old Sookey rented the whole of her cottage. Her rent was high, but if her landlord bled her she in her turn bled the families to whom she sub-let her three top rooms. She also added to this, earnings from slum necromancy at three-

pence a palm or a tea-cup. She was a "Gyppo," and all the mysteries of the future had been revealed to her.

She had also, up to now and through the threat of Bill Roberts's strong arm, drawn something a week from those of her children "in work." All this plus Bill Roberts's earnings in his dual capacity had made her a Cherry Pie Gardens plutocrat.

And she liked being a plutocrat. She grabbed and spent coin with a greed and an avidity her kind considers only possible in capitalists, but no capitalist ever spent so wantonly as her class, else he would never have been a capitalist. She enjoyed exercising the position, power and indulgences such an income gave her. She enjoyed luxurious idleness and certain pungent and expensive drinks. She hated the idea of curtailing her generous meals. She clung to her regular weekly indulgences at the cinema and music-halls, and she found it impossible to give up betting with the pavement bookie whose stand was outside the "Bandy Leg Walk."

Even with the death of Bill Roberts and the almost immediate flitting of Jim her eldest boy, with its momentary loss, even with the refusal of Min, her eldest child in service in a City hotel, to supply a dribble, or even to come near Cherry Pie Gardens again, she was still a warm member financially. But like many a bankrupt financier she found she had developed a habit of life that made existence on a smaller scale almost unendurable.

Something must happen, then, to fill the gap, and Young Sookey was obviously that something. Sookey had not been "out" yet. She had been late in leaving school. She was naturally clever. She had shown so marked a brilliance, not merely in schooling, but in such drawing and design as her school provided, that her school mistress had pleaded for a continuance of attendance. She had succeeded, not because Old Sookey thought learning of any account, but because Bill

Roberts had insisted that the girl shouldn't waste any more time before earning. When Bill Roberts had taken up definite attitudes Old Sookey always opposed him. It is possible, too, that Old Sookey had noted her daughter's beauty and thought ahead. A little extra refinement and learning would be all to the good.

When Young Sookey did leave school she did not go out to service as other girls did, nor into a factory. She remained at home and became the unpaid servant there. Old Sookey was becoming lazy and luxurious, though she had had a fierce fire of energy as a young woman, also she wanted to keep her eye on Young Sook.

Now money counted more than ease, and Young Sookey must be put to something. Old Sookey's cronies came in to discuss the point. They did it with unction. It had galled them to see Young Sookey acting the lady when their own daughters had been workers for a year at her age.

The cronies made many suggestions. There was a blacking factory in Goose Common always in need of hands. There was a varnish and paint-making concern that drew upon the district. Girls were going into multiple shops as errand-girls and counter hands, too. And there was service, daily in the terraced houses, or "live in" at the villas of the Park. Sookey, o' course, was too young to go to big houses in the West End, the cronies thought, and they looked slant-eyed at Old Sookey in the hope that that would draw her.

Old Sookey was never drawn. She listened stolidly, showing neither enthusiasm nor dissent. Young Sookey, looking at that blank, implacable face, knew that what the cronies said did not matter at all. Her future had already been decided upon by the deep-moving and remorseless personality in that gross and moveless body. And she rebelled against and hated her mother.

She hated Old Sookey because she feared her. All Old

Sookey's children hated her like that. Her stilly, black-eyed reticence telling of her unyielding resolution, her utter lack of scruple and the terrible moral force that could bend them to her will appalled them. She was as soulless and as terrible as a devil. Everything, including her children, was used to satisfy her own ends. No other law, Divine or human, swayed her. Not Divine laws, because they had no meaning for her, not human, because they were only painful when one wasn't clever enough to evade them. She knew herself to be clever enough.

She was quite certain she was clever enough to make profit out of Young Sookey's beauty—even at Young Sookey's age.

Young Sookey knew it. In rebellion and fear she waited while the dark stagnant will of Old Sookey considered her future. She knew that the decision was near when her mother began to show a cold, keen and practical interest in her looks.

It began with her hair. Abruptly Old Sookey stirred from her vast brooding to say:

"I don't like that 'air o' yourn. Take it darn. . . . Do it 'igh up."

"I like it as it is," said Sookey, trying to defy.

"Get on with it, nar," said her mother, without heat, without mercy.

Sookey got on with it. She meant to resist—she might just as well have tried to resist a steam-roller. She took down her hair. She built it up again to curt directions. She turned this way and that in the light to exhibit the new effect. Submitted to the pokings and puffings of Old Sookey, took the hair down again, began to dress it again. Hour after hour she worked before the stoic and implacable woman until she found the arrangement that was most effective for her looks.

Sookey had been right in preferring it massed low. With its dark frame about her face the piquancy and the individual-

ity of the features were emphasized. Old Sookey decided to allow it to be so, but she insisted on a fluffiness that spurred Sookey to revolt. The immovable old woman ignored revolt. She said evenly:

"Take yer blouse off."

Sookey stood in a slip and skirt, white, young shoulders supporting a thin, white neck and finely poised head. Old Sookey seemed to gleam with stagnant satisfaction.

"Yers, yor a pritty 'un, all right," she said. "Pritty shoulders, pritty skin . . ."

Catching a glimpse of herself in the spotted glass of the fireplace, Sookey herself felt an elation that warred with rebellion. Her shoulders and throat told her that she was born to wear evening dress.

Always now Old Sookey's mind moved slowly but ruthlessly in one set direction. One day she put a pot of rouge, a lip-stick, and a slab of eye-black on the kitchen table, said: "Come over 'ere."

Sookey in a flare of anger shouted: "I ain't going ter put any of that stuff on me."

Old Sookey was not disturbed. She did not even consider this defiance worth a verbal answer. She just swept her right fist outward, and Sookey was slammed up against the dresser, so that all the crockery rattled and her own head sang like a bell. As she cowered, dazed and afraid, her mother opened the cosmetics, and in her own time said:

"Fetch the looking glarss from me bedroom——"

Sookey fetched it. Seething with revolt she sat down before it and applied the rouge and touched up her lips and her eyes to her mother's direction. She hated what it meant, but was fascinated by the changes in herself the cosmetics brought about. She took on an artificial yet uncannily radiant loveliness. . . . And she had her triumphs. Her mother was all for overdoing it, but at this her sense of artistry flared out.

She spat scorn at her mother's desire to plaster the paint on. And Old Sookey, with her queer, dark wisdom, gave way at once to the better taste of her daughter.

Sookey's rebellion and anxiety grew with every fresh move her mother made. She knew that unless she could escape that relentless woman would have her will with her. Yet escape was not easy. Being without means she could not get away beyond Old Sookey's power, and until she did that her case was hopeless.

She made her attempt. One day Old Sookey had come into the scullery where she indulged her strange taste for bathing in the tin wash-bath. Old Sookey had ignored her daughter's outraged protests, had stood studying her darkly. The ugliness of that penetrating and assessing gaze had driven Sookey to frantic action.

Next day she arrived home from a walk with the news that she had been to a registry office, and had the offer of a stiuation as kitchen-maid at a good house in the Park.

"Wot abart it?" asked Old Sookey, not even turning from the sink, where she was washing some article of clothing.

"I c'n go in in a week's time," said Sookey, trying to be off-hand.

"Ferget it," said Old Sookey, and she took up her washing.

"It's a good place," cried Sookey. "The wages is good. . . ."

"That'll do. I've got me plans fer you, me girl," said the unruffled old woman.

"Yers," raged Sookey. "An' you knows what they are, an' I ain't going ter be put upon. . . ."

Old Sookey knew that that was the moment of revolt. She pivoted round slowly, faced her daughter with a still, dark immobility. The very force of the stare from those hooded and unfathomable eyes brought Sookey to a breathless standstill. She stopped, panting.

"Wot you sayin'?" asked Old Sookey in a soft, dead voice.

"You know," snapped Sookey. "You know it's agin the lor. You know you carn't make me do nothin' I——"

"I know you does wot I tells yer ter do," said Old Sookey calmly.

"I won't," shouted Sookey. "I'm goin' ter take this place. I'm goin'——"

"You 'eard me," said Old Sookey terribly, implacably. "I've made me plans. I'm yer mother. Yor going ter do wot I tell yer to do."

"I won't. I'm takin' this place——"

"I'll pull yer outter any place be yer ear."

"You sharn't. I'll tell the coppers——"

Old Sookey put out her hand. She showed neither passion nor animation. She gripped the mass of dark hair on Sookey's head, jerked the sapling body back until she could stare like a monster devil into the young eyes. Then deliberately her free hand thumped and thumped the young, soft body until Sookey began screaming in a madness of pain. Emotionless she went on thumping.

As suddenly she stopped. With a jerk of her arm she flung the sobbing girl right across the scullery, stood regarding her malevolently, hands on gigantic hips.

"Nar, d'yer unnerstan'?" she said thickly, evenly. "You do wot *I* says. You do it without no tork nor lip. See! I'm yer mother, an' I know 'ow to learn little sluts like you."

She stared at the crouching and writhing girl for a full minute, turned, and went stolidly on with her washing.

Her air suggested that she was completely master of the situation. But she was not feeling so sure of herself inside. Young Sookey had not answered. Young Sookey hid her eyes behind her elbow. That meant that Young Sookey was still obstinate, but had been careful to hide her defiance.

CHAPTER VI

The man Herbert Young wouldn't "leave her be."

From the day of the funeral he had hung about the end of the Gardens like a terrier at a rat hole.

He was there to waylay Sookey. Sookey knew it. She was torn between her crawling abhorrence of his degenerate sliminess and amusement at the ease and constancy with which she gave him the slip. On the day after Old Sookey had thrashed her she did not give him the slip. She did not try to.

She was in revolt. Definitely she knew that Old Sookey had matured some scheme for her future. At any time now she would be sacrificed entirely for Old Sookey's benefit. The thing was inevitable. Unless she could find some way of escape she knew she had not the power to withstand the dark force of the dreadful old woman. All night she had considered her chances of escape. Mister Roche might be a way. The doctor's son might be a way. Herbert Young might be a way.

She was under no misconception about Herbert Young. She guessed what his profession was. She realized that his intentions might be even uglier than Old Sookey's. It wasn't that aspect which gave her hope, she found that in the man's personality.

She despised Herbert Young. She felt he hadn't a backbone. She had seen him wilt before the stronger personality of her mother, and, from her own strong vitality, felt contempt for such a creature. She was confident that if it came to a clash she could overbear that soft, unhealthy, easily frightened wretch, and so she wondered if she might not

utilize the man's desire to get possession of her as a means of beating Old Sookey.

She had, she decided, to get some external aid. She was without money or clothes to effect an escape.

This time, instead of slipping like a harried cat out of Cherry Pie Gardens she walked slowly along Rye Street towards The Green. At a safe distance from the policeman, of whom Herbert Young was so afraid, she dawdled in front of a shop.

Herbert Young slithered to her side. He had a curious walk, sliding sidelong towards his objective with an air of being concerned in something entirely different. Experience had taught him that for him to address a woman directly was dangerous. In the West End he had been thrashed several times by furious lovers or husbands for this. But he was accomplished. Several terms in jail had taught him the art of talking with stiff lips and from the side of the mouth. He stared into the window, and said with a dreadful hoarse softness:

"'Allo, Young Sook, me dear, fancy meetin' you?"

"Wasn't fer want o' tryin', was it?" said Sookey scornfully.

She loathed the man, and was sorry she had allowed him to come near her. There was something about his cottony pulpiness that revolted even her indifference to unpleasant surroundings and contacts. He said with an elaborate ease:

"Well, that's a fac'. I've been waiting fer the chance uv a tork."

"'Ere we are, then," she jeered.

"Come fer a stroll, Sook."

"Still too near the 'coppers,' are we?"

His shoulder-blades wriggled nervously. "You ain't 'arf a one," he said with a sickly grin. "But I saw that right away. One o' the dashing sort."

"I know all abart that—*an'* you," she sneered. "Well, wot d'yer want?"

"Aw, come fer a stroll. Just up ter The Green. No 'arm in it."

"You c'n bet on that," she said contemptuously. "I got *yor* number."

They walked up the street. It wasn't so much a street as an arcade of plate-glass, with, behind the plate-glass, endless and bewildering masses of women's garments. Women's clothes in every conceivable revelation, from butterfly silk garters to combinations of spun gossamer. From coarse linen underclothes—servant lines—to camisoles of sheer lace, and furs of incredible price. Goose Common is pre-eminent for women's shopping as well as for the virulence of its slums, a strange, ironic combination. The man, Herbert Young, knew it to be a combination very advantageous to his profession. Many a time he had allowed those shining windows to do his work on the heart of a servant girl. He deliberately lagged before the most alluring displays.

"Pritty, ain't they?" he said, and Sookey was beginning to realize that his voice had an effect. It was smooth and sticky and sweet. It soothed like a syrup.

"Yers," breathed Sookey, standing and staring, while her eyes selected certain garments that pleased her, and her will rejected the rest with her queer, fine instinct for loveliness and colour.

"You'd like to have some o' them, I lay?"

"That's an easy one," sighed Sookey. She would like to have one or two of those garments just to look at, just to feel, just to hang up as decorations. Loveliness had that reaction on her.

"That lill' frock over there," purred Herbert Young, pointing the finger of the tempter at a flaming, shining, clamant sheath of silk in scarlet and gold.

"I wouldn't be seen dead in it," said Sookey startlingly.

"Crr!" gasped Herbert Young. "Don't yer know clarssy goods when yer see 'em?"

"Yers—that ain't."

"Ho—ain't it? I calls it tip-top."

"That's it," said Sookey, with a scorn that made him want to hit her.

"Wot's *yor* idea o' clarss, then?" he asked on a soft note. Sookey examined the window fully with her unhurried, selective glance. Her finger pointed unhesitatingly to a modest-looking garment in delicately modulated shades of blue.

"That's the best thing in the winder," she said.

Herbert Young was disgusted. Her drabness in taste made him fearful about her value. It seemed a dangerous flaw in her composition. The right sort of girl—his right sort of girl—ought to have a saucy taste. The gayer, the more emphatic the colours the better. High-pitched brightness was the thing that made girls—his sort of girls—attractive. Why, a girl wearing that blue dress would frighten anyone off, she'd look too much like a duchess.

He was contemptuous of the inefficiency of Sookey's upbringing. She'd learn, of course. He'd teach her to appreciate vividness beyond the dreams of Cherry Pie Gardens, garments with a flash and a flare about them that told men at once that they were in for a high old time.

The fact that Sookey had chosen with a taste quite astounding for one of her upbringing was beyond him. All the same, he veiled his contempt in a pretence of startled praise. He asked her where she got her remarkable sense of style from. He told her she had picked out the one dress which proved she had instincts superior to her environment, instincts that ought to be satisfied. He led her on to choose a complete outfit to match. She played the game with him because she

had so often played it with herself. It even thrilled her a little that this time it might not be entirely make-believe. This man might be willing to supply all her mind craved for.

Herbert Young was not thrilled. The way she rejected over-ribboned and over-frilled garments for soberer articles made him think that perhaps she wasn't quite all there. But he persisted in his praise. He told her that it was a shame that a girl like her had not the opportunities for satisfying so distinguished a taste. He told her that if he had his way she would have her opportunities. By the time they reached the top of the street some of her repugnance of his personality had died. Herbert Young was an expert in his art from long and varied experience.

The Green, Goose Common, is a huge, leg of-mutton-shaped open space that had once been the neck of the common that gave the district its name. It commenced abruptly in a dreary residential quarter that began where the Rye Street dress shops became, it seemed, exhausted by so much display and ceased to be. The old goose pond and the tall sign-post of a public-house were the first indication of its dawning charms.

Beyond the pond was a sad, raw expanse of bare earth where the youth of Goose Common wrung what exercise their instincts demanded out of impossible conditions. There were many there now, kicking about a football. Herbert Young pressed her to walk on beyond this area, beyond the grass meadow of The Green into the seclusion of Hern's Dell at the end. Sookey sat down on a bench near the football players. Herbert Young objected to this, but having played his fish to within reach of the gaff, there being no policeman about, and the football youths fully twenty yards distant, and of no account anyhow, he sat and made his next move.

"It's a shime," he repeated indignantly, "you 'aving the clarssy style you as, an' things being as they are."

"'Ow are they?" asked Sookey coolly, fully alert to Herbert Young's intentions.

"Wot I mean is, that old faggot, yor Ma, won't let me put yer in the way o' getting clothes like wot a gel like yer reelly orter 'ave."

"An' wot's the way?" asked Sookey, much too cold and sharp for the indirect Herbert.

"Oh, *there's* ways," said the man uneasily. "You'd like to 'ave a tip-top time, too? Dances an' theaytres, going to swell restaurants, going abart with the best, 'avin' a slap-up time, as well as wearin' pritty clothes, eh? A girl like you could 'ave a dam' good time."

Her calm eyes examined his own shabby clothes. What he said was heady, but Sookey had the steadiness of will to see the gap between Herbert Young's promises and his appearance. She said:

"You a-goin' ter give me all that?"

"I might and I mightn't," he snapped, irritated by her directness. "I'm yer lorful farther, any'ow, ain't I?"

"I've 'eard yer siy it often enough. 'As it got any meanin'?"

"Yus, it's got meaning," he said portentously. "It means I've as much right ter you as that ole slut. Be rights yer oughter be livin' with me."

"An' wot then?" demanded Sookey.

"Arr! You'd see," he said darkly.

Sookey was silent. She thought: "'E's a liar, an' 'e knows the ropes. 'E'd do the dirty on me. 'E's gotter oily tongue."

"Be rights," snarled Herbert, "you oughter come straight 'ome with me *nar*."

"Where's yer 'ome?" asked Sookey.

"Or to-morrow," said Herbert quickly. There were things to be done if his safety was to be assured. "That's the ticket, young Sook. I could come ter the end o' the Gardens ter-morrow abart this time. In a taxi—I'll take yer 'ome in it. I gotter get me place ready, yer see. I'll treat yer fine, Sook."

Sookey drew him by saying: "She treated me crool lars' night. She bashed me."

"There yer are. She ain't fit ter look arter a pritty girl wot likes life an' a good time, a girl wot 'as a bit o' dash. I'll look arter yer proper."

"Gimme just the cloes I want?"

"That's it, put yer in the way o' getting all th' clothes yer want. You won't never get no chance living in a sink like them Gardens. But where I live——"

"You ain't too free telling where that is?" she said.

"Don't never you mind where it is," he said. "I ain't tellin' nuthin' fer nuthin'. But mark yer, it's somewhere where that ole devil carn't touch yer. An' it's where a girl wot's as pritty an' clarssy as you c'n 'ave the time o' 'er life—properly 'andled."

"Properly 'andled. 'Ow's that?"

"I mean, if she's a sensible girl."

"Sensible? 'Ow?"

"Well, being sensible. Not a blinking fool, yer know. A girl wot's not stand-offish. 'Oo c'n 'ave 'er lark with the best o' 'em. 'Oo's fond o' a bit o' company an' a gay time. . . . You know, a girl 'oo isn't stoopid abart things. A girl like you, 'oo's got good looks, c'n 'ave a tip-top time if she's properly 'andled."

Sookey's loathing of the man became a sickness. His sleek eagerness was bestial. She slid away from him because even in her experience he was unspeakably unclean. She said ominously:

"*You'd* do the 'andlin'?"

"I'd look arter yer. The mistakes most girls make," he said with a weighty professional air, "is that they don't 'ave no man be'ind 'em. Now, I'd see you was properly looked arter, that yer wasn't done . . ."

" 'Cept be yerself, yer swine," rapped Sookey.

"Nar, yer ain't going ter be a blithering little fool," he snarled.

"I *ain't,* yer c'n stake yer oath on it," snapped Sookey. She rose and walked towards the footballers. The man shuffled after her.

" 'Ere," he called. "Wot's yer game? Don't yer be a little fool. You listen ter me, Young Sook."

"Go away an' boil yer face, yer make me sick," she said, and he did. She who could remain unmoved through most things that would have turned a squeamish stomach felt herself trembling and nauseated. As she quickened her step Herbert Young grabbed her wrist.

"That's yer game, yer little bitch," he snarled. "Well, I'll larn yer 'oo's yer farther. . . ."

"Bert!" yelled Sookey. "Bert!"

Herbert Young struck her over the mouth. Twisting her arm he propelled her away from the footballers towards a clump of bushes. As she yelled for Bert again he backhanded her so that her lips began to bleed. The twist on her arm was so severe that it doubled her and muffled her shouting. She knew that her cries did not worry him very much. In Goose Common it is not unusual for the parent to chastise the offspring in public. If Bert didn't hear. . . .

But Bert Tavener had heard. Their progress stopped short. She became aware of the shadow of an extra presence. She heard the off-hand voice of Bert telling Herbert Young to leave the girl be. She heard Herbert Young's mongrel

whine saying: "Mind yer business, Bert Tavener. A farther's gotter right ter clout 'is own brat, ain't he?"

"You know me, eh? Well, I'm after knowing you, Herbert Young," said the off-hand voice. "Sling yer hook. Let the girl be unless yer want's a punch on the kisser."

Herbert Young let go Sookey's arms, and she stood erect to see him backing away.

He was swearing with his incredible foulness, and he was threatening to have the law on Bert. Bert was as smiling and casual as he always was. He said:

"Right you are. There's a 'pincher' over there. Come along an' charge me."

Herbert Young shot one sidelong glance at the distant but approaching policeman. Then he shuffled off—in the opposite direction.

CHAPTER VII

Bert Tavener said calmly:

"And *you* wants a clip over the earhole, Young Sook, going abart with a swine like that."

Bert Tavener was staring at her out of his steadily attentive grey eyes. You could never tell whether you were a beetle or a beauty from the way Bert looked at you. Bert had a strange, serene aloofness. Bert was the Buck of the Gardens—but that didn't explain all of him.

He was nineteen, and he was an athlete. He was flat and deep in the shoulder if a little too fine in the lower limbs. He was an abnormality not altogether rare in the slums. He was a creature of almost perfect physique and quite clean mind sprung from and existing unharmed amid the dregs of degeneration.

Bert's body down to his calves was that of a Hercules, a Hercules of active and swift functioning. He was, in fact, a natural fighting animal, a prize-fighter. He was not yet distinguished in his calling, but he was on the way. He had smashed the chances of many other budding champions during those winter months when the local swimming baths were boarded over to serve for political meetings, church teas and boxing exhibitions. He was also figuring increasingly in those basilicas of the Noble Art, The Ring, Blackfriars, and Premierland. There were those who did not doubt that one day he would enter the ring at the National Sporting Club and emerge a Lonsdale Belt champion.

These things were enough to make Bert important and remarkable. His personal character also added to his celebrity. He was notorious for his lack of vices. He was clean-minded

and clean-mouthed in a world of youth quite otherwise. He had an alien decency, and, carrying it off with utter unconcern, it gave him an air of untouchable aloofness.

He kept his nature clean against odds, partly because he preferred a sound and exercised body to the enervation of viciousness, partly because he was a Catholic.

His mother was a thick-bodied, thick-limbed Irish woman. He got his fierce fighting strain from her, but undoubtedly he got his curious white steadiness of mind from her, too. In her home regular Sunday church and personal chastity were part of the very air Bert had breathed all his life. It was not that he was ignorant of vice, nobody could be in the Gardens, but he had somehow remained coolly outside it.

He seemed to use his religion as most men used beer, that is with a sort of habitual liking. Saturday evening he was generally to be met heading for his church to go to Confession, and he was as off-hand and indifferent about your knowing it as he was about most things. Since he had given up a van boy's job and taken to professional boxing he served Mass three times a week. Before every one of his fights he went to Communion, and he made no bones about the fact that he wound a thing of brown tapes, called a scapula, into the scarf he wore round his middle when in the ring.

Sookey had deliberately walked Herbert Young up to the football ground because she knew that Bert Tavener was there, and she knew that Bert could be relied upon to send Herbert off with a flea in his ear if needs be. She had assessed Bert's trustworthiness. She also knew that Bert was a bit gone on her, since she had transformed herself by putting up her hair and wearing her new skirts. He had ceased to ignore her. He had taken to punching her in that painful but affectionate way which tells a girl in the Gardens she has attracted a young man's fancy.

He wasn't really mashed on her. She knew that his cool

head would keep him away from dangerous entanglements—which in his case meant marriage. He had his mother to keep, and he had his way to make. Even if his own cool Irish practically did not prevent him making a fool of himself, his mother would undoubtedly have a say in the matter.

In any case, Sookey wasn't mashed on him. She had a certain respect for him because, like herself, he had qualities lifting him above his environment, but she had no manner of use for any son of Cherry Pie.

Bert Tavener said evenly:

"Wot you bin up to, Young Sook? Don't you know what that feller is?"

"I'm ready ter learn," said Sookey cheekily.

"He's the reason why girls take the wrong turning," he said with a slight grin.

" 'E's my father, too," she said defiantly.

"So I heard," said Bert, who had an Irish instinct for the right place of the aitch. "But you don't believe it."

" 'E ain't no worse than Old Sookey that I can see," she said bitterly. "She's going to do the dirty on me, anyhow."

Bert took that calmly if he looked at her keenly.

"No cod?" he asked.

"Gorspel," she said savagely.

"She's a mangy old hag," said Bert with the slow impressiveness that was his anger. He had an even discipline in temper and rarely lost it. When he did it was like a sudden sharp flame in oil, and for ten minutes he would be really dangerous. "Wot you going to do?"

"I'm 'arf a mind to put the lor on 'er," said Sookey without conviction.

Bert Tavener didn't answer that. It wasn't worth answering. It didn't mean anything. Cherry Pie Gardens never turned to the law for help. Its citizens refused all contact

with the law. It was their natural enemy, and they had no truck with an enemy.

"P'raps you made a mistake about her." he said.

"You know I ain't," she said scornfully. "She's got the same ideas as that fancy man, 'Erbert Young. *I* know."

Bert Tavener was not shocked. He was not vicious, but he was not stupid, either.

"Going to cut a bunk?" he asked.

"Where to?" she sneered. "Fat chance *I've* got."

"London's pretty big," he grinned. "Wouldn't be hard for a shrimp like you to hide in it."

"And 'ow'd I live?" she asked. She was not against running away, she was merely practical.

"There's service," he said. "There's shops. You c'n get a job."

"Shops—where'd I live till I got my pay?" Shops appealed most to Sookey. "What'll I be able to do in shops?"

"Well, there's service, then," he said.

"Without a reffrunce?" she jeered.

"Plenty'll take you without—if you tell them the tale. You're up from the country an' have never bin out before."

"Where's me clothes?" she said scornfully. "Where's me box? They'll fall over each other, won't they, to take in a girl 'oo's only got wot she stands up in?"

"Ain't yoo got no clothes?" he asked, trying to pretend she had not put her finger on a fundamental difficulty.

"I got some," she said. "But can yer see me gettin' at 'em without Old Sook knowing? She watches me like an old cat. 'Sides, she's locked 'em up."

Bert Tavener was silent, staring at her.

"I thought o' service," said Sookey passionately. "I'd go like a shot. But 'ow can I? If I 'ad a couple o' parnds . . . fer the loan. . . ."

"No go, Sook," he said calmly. "I ain't got it. I don't say I wouldn't lend it you, but till I fight Jem Huik I 'aven't more than a dollar to spare. An' that's not for seven weeks."

"My number'll be up be then," she said.

"It's a shame," said Bert Tavener.

"An' *that* don't 'elp me," said Sookey.

"It's not as if you're that sort o' girl," he said solemnly.

"You make me tired," she said passionately.

"I'm trying to think o' something, Sook," he grinned.

"You c'n think yer 'ead off," she said. "Thinking won't 'elp."

She turned and began to walk down Rye Street towards the Gardens. He fell into step beside her.

"Don't let me be keeping you," she said loftily.

"I can punch his face off if he stops you again, anyhow," said Bert Tavener evenly without altering step.

CHAPTER VIII

SOOKEY's quick and determined thoughts fixed themselves on the doctor's son, whom she now knew to be Paul Geneste.

She did not know what she expected of him, but he had been more and more in her mind since she had accosted him at The Triangle.

Her thoughts about him were a medley, part mature, part childish, part shrewdness, part desire. It was apparent to her that she had not the means, knowledge or force of character to resist the dark relentless will of her mother; her only hope lay in the intervention of some exterior and superior power.

Paul Geneste seemed that.

Her intuition had told her that not only had he an intelligence and a force beyond anything she had met, but also that there was something in his composition that a girl could trust. What it was she did not know, she only knew it was there. Whether she expected him to solve her problem with a flash of Olympian omnipotence, a gesture of knight errantry, the loan of a few pounds, or whether she had some vague expectation that he would act as other rich young sparks of the Park had been known to act towards pretty but socially inferior girls, she did not attempt to decide. It did not matter really. Even the last did not matter. It would give her her own say in a destiny her mother meant to make inevitable, anyhow. Her certainty about Old Sookey's intentions were increasing. Old Sookey had been laying out money on clothes for her—silk stockings and underwear beyond the dreams of Cherry Pie Gardens.

For two evenings she went in search of Paul Geneste, going

up to The Green again, even passing Herbert Young, who was still hanging about, contemptuously, in her determination to try this new avenue.

She passed the raw, sad area of the football field, where Bert Tavener and other blokes ever kicked about a football. She walked across the expanding sweep of grey-black and embittered grass upon which rabbit-swarms of babies were automatically thumped into enjoying themselves by harried elder sisters under fourteen. She passed the scattering of enfeebled trees under which, on Sundays, the preachers of all religions and "isms" exposed the fallacies of all other religions and "isms." She skirted the great pond of scummy water called the "Yot Pond," by a people who had never seen a real yacht outside pictures, and from here she crossed the broad butt of the leg-of-mutton and entered Hern's Dell.

Hern's Dell is one of those shocks which London can deliver with such startling unconcern. It is a jewel of sheer beauty in a zone of dirt. One stride through an iron gate and a hedge of laurels and all the glamours of loveliness encompass one.

Hern's Dell had once been the great garden of a private house. The house had been built by a sea captain and good citizen who had made a fortune in the slave trade in those days when Goose Common was really a country village. This trafficker in human bodies had had, as might be expected from human nature, a passion for flowers. His children had inherited that passion, but, apparently, little of his business distinction. It was said that the curse of the founder's calling was on his descendants. It might have been so. Instead of adding greater riches to his foundation of riches, of going on and up and taking that position among the aristocracy of the land only proper to such an ancestry, their fortune had dwindled. Though they had loathed the growing squalor of Goose Common they could not afford to buy an

estate elsewhere. In time they could not afford to stay, and had to sell the house. In a grave attack of philanthropy the Goose Common Town Council bought it to extend The Green.

The council had been betrayed by common sense into keeping the gardens unspoiled. Under the care of Scottish gardeners the place continued to maintain its glorious beauty amid the ugliness of its surroundings. Its rock gardens and its mossy-banked stream, its serene little yew parlours and shrub arbours, its sleek lawns and its old trees, its pergolas, its sunk garden and sundial, even its fruit trees espaliered against the mellow red-brick wall of its sun garden, wherein shone its many thousand blooms of rare roses, were tenderly nursed by the delicate genius of rough men.

Even Cherry Pie Gardens could step into Paradise here.

Cherry Pie Gardens rarely did, as a matter of fact. Chy-iking and horse-play were sternly repressed by the park-keepers. The grass was there to be kept off. There was no play to animal spirits in such a place. Apart from lovers in the evening the Dell was almost deserted.

Sookey often went there. She went not because she loved flowers and serenity, but because colours were fundamentals in her existence. She loved the gorgeousness, the blending and the shading of colours. The subtle effects of colours, the song-burst of bold, massed effects, the entrancement of shy, quiet tones exquisitely matched gave her an inexpressible sensation little short of intoxication. She loved, above all, though she did not know the reason, the perfect natural art and rightness of everything in this old garden. It was the one place within her knowledge where she was not jarred by clashing, artificial or strained effects. She knew nothing at all about artistry, but it was the artistic justness of everything here that satisfied her decisive and selective mind.

She had learnt that Paul Geneste came into Hern's Dell on most evenings. The Park, the select area of his home, was near, and he seemed to have the habit of coming here on light evenings to read. That seemed natural to Sookey, who knew none but her own circumstances. She imagined his home to be like her own, too crowded and promiscuous for concentration.

It was not until the second evening, however, that Sookey found him. He was on an iron bench isolated amid shrubs. She would not have discovered him only she knew all the backwaters of that mazy place. Two books were on the bench beside him, one in his hand, and he was deep in study. His confusion when she stood before him and ragged his attention from his reading amused and amazed her. He blushed and was nervous. She was scornful that one of his superiority should show such qualms, especially one having the strength and character Paul Geneste's face seemed to show.

She employed again the best manner of her school mistress, if not quite that lady's language. She said:

"You don't remember me—I lay?"

"You're the girl from Cherry Pie Gardens," he said, and he seemed to get redder.

"'Ard—Hardcastle Street," she corrected, finding that aspirated aitches and a careful manner of talking did not seem so soppy when speaking to him.

"Well—you know—I asked my father. You're Sookey Roberts, aren't you?"

Sookey was not at all disturbed at being caught out in a lie. She was elated. He'd been interested enough to ask about her. She was remarkable enough to have remained in his father's memory. Sookey felt this was an omen of success.

"Yers—yes," she answered, "and you're the doctor's son, Mr. Geneste."

"Yes, Dr. Geneste's son," he agreed, and was uneasily

silent. This girl was strangely good-looking, and she was provocative, too. Yet people of his sort didn't——

Sookey read his mind in a flash.

"Bit of a cheek the likes of me talkin' to you, eh?"

She had, without knowing it, said the right thing. Paul Geneste was naturally unaffected. He was also, at that period, in his Fabian phase. The mere thought that he, who was full of ardour for social reform, was being stuffy to one of those he longed to help stung him.

"What rot," he laughed. "Why shouldn't you talk to me? I was a bit in the air, that's all." He lifted the book he was reading. "I was mugging up—learning things."

She looked at the book and then at him. Since he was considerably over fourteen when one, gratefully, was freed from school, since he was, in fact, a grown man, she wondered if this talk of learning was some method of pulling her leg. He laughed, said: "I'm going to be like my father, a doctor. There's an awful lot to study in it."

Sookey supposed he was right. It didn't matter. She must get down to business. She said carefully, having rehearsed it:

"Wot I wanted to speak to yu abart—about was as I'm sorry I gave you lip down in The Triangle that day."

"Oh, that's all right," he said embarrassed.

Sookey waited. She had expected him to rise to that lead. By his retort she hoped to learn whether he was a gay young spark or not.

"It was sauce," she said. "I didn't ought to have done it."

"Don't you worry," he said. "I was rather rude myself, wasn't I?"

"You was? 'Ow?"

"Well, I said some silly things about the people in the Gardens."

"Oh, that! You wasn't so far out. We're a low, dirty lot."

"No, you're not," he laughed, and he meant it. Her individuality was distinctive and impressive. She smiled swiftly at him. He was responding to her lead. He was finding her attractive. He was a young spark all right. He had moved his books a little, no more than an inch, but it was an invitation to sit. She did so, sidling her body towards him, so that her thin, fine limbs were close to his and her sleek shoulder was almost against his hand resting on the back of the bench. There was her arm ready to be seized and pressed as Mister Roche had pressed it. He was a young spark all right. . . . And she didn't know that she was so sorry, after all, that he was.

The evening was moving to a soft, pearly dusk as the dying sun gave a bloom to the smoky London air. The Dell was draining of noise. They were extraordinarily and poignantly alone. Not merely the custom of the place, but the moment and the atmosphere demanded kisses. Her eyes slanted softly up to Paul Geneste's face, and she knew she wanted to be kissed. It was a queer, ugly face, but there was a look in it, a power in it, a sort of strong gentleness in it that made it alluring.

Paul Geneste, the Fabian fire in him, ignored her shoulder and her eyes, he said with a slight frown: "Even the others in the Gardens can't really help being what they are, you know. They are forced into it."

"Soap ain't dear and water don't 'urt nobody," said Sookey violently, thanks to the shock his lack of personal interest had caused. He went on urgently:

"What I mean is, they have been forced into that way of living by circumstances over which they have no control. They're the victims of our system. They haven't had the chance others have had. . . ."

"Rats!" she jeered, angry that he should have gone off on this tack. "They got just as many chances as you an' me to wash. They likes being dirty——"

"You don't see what I mean," said Paul, who merely felt rather than saw what he meant himself. He tried to make her see. He gave her all that he had read, all that he had talked over with other world-righters of his own age at his hospital. He was very much in earnest if not strictly coherent. Sookey understood very little of what he was driving at, though she recognized certain familiar stock phrases and they filled her with scorn. She interrupted tauntingly:

"You bin listenin' to them Socialist tub-thumpers. Them chaps! Windbags!"

She had heard Old Sookey call them windbags with that air of scorn and authority.

He was astonished at the way the dog bit the hand that was stroking it. He cried surprised:

"But don't you think the Socialists right?"

"About Cherry Pie Gardens—nah!" Her contempt was acrid. "You just come down 'ome an' see for yourself. A low, lazy lot. And dirty—Crr! A lot of slackers an' wasters—I 'ates them all."

She said it with a vehemence that made him stare. He was also taken aback that the slums should reject his kindly excuses for the slums. Of course this strange, vital girl did not understand first principles.

"But don't you see," he said, "it's the way they have been brought up. . . ."

He tried to explain her derogatory lot to herself. He found it difficult. Sookey's dark, unusually penetrating eyes were on his face, and he felt that there was contempt in them. There was. Sookey considered he was being particularly soft to think about Cherry Pie Gardens as he did. She knew all about the Gardens with a bitter realism of

knowledge. She had neither sympathy nor pity for her fellows in the slums. She saw them as a shiftless, slack and useless lot. They drank too much, they ate too much with a continuous, dull gluttony, they wasted prodigiously, food and money as well as time. They were spineless and idle. The men shirked earning whenever they could, and proclaimed callously that their greatest ambition in life was to get some woman to work for them. The women were as bad. They neglected their homes to lounge about in dirty, draggled slovenliness, they wasted hours and hours in dull, senseless gossiping. Dirt could easily be got rid of with water and elbow grease, but even when not gossiping or standing at the bar of The Crooked Billet the wives were too inert, slack and self-indulgent to attend to their homes or children. "They ain't got no guts," Sookey cried, voicing her contempt. "Look at Liza Tull. All 'er three brats 'as 'ad the seats outter their britches for munths, an' she goes on 'aving tripe or stoodills ever night——"

"Stoodills?"

"Stood eels," said Sookey carefully. "Wot I mean is, that every night she has a relish to 'er supper, not caring a 'ang."

"After all there's no reason why poor Liza Tull shouldn't——"

"There's the seats in them britches," snapped Sookey. "Tripe or stoodi—stood eels or black pudden or block trimmings every night cost money. What I mean is, if she'd only stop guzzling fer a week those brats c'd have new britches. All on 'em."

"Perhaps Liza Tull is hungry."

"Fat 'og," said Sookey. "She's shovelling it in all day. Starts with onions and bread in bed. She's a fair 'orror an' as fat as a beer barrel."

"It sounds," said Paul, the budding doctor, "like a disease."

"It's not 'arf a disease—now," said Sookey. "Your ole

Pa told 'er that if she didn't pull up she'd eat herself into the ground. She ain't got the backbone to give over. She ain't no different from the rest, neither. They're all like that, they don't care wot happens as long as number one is all right. Look arter themselves all the time. . . . Some o' them want puttin' through the 'oop, proper."

Sookey's onslaught of grim fact against his sentimental theory left Paul Geneste feeling rather helpless. He was not unconscious of the irony of the attitude either. Still, he had studied, and knew the root causes behind all this.

"What you think you see was really caused by the force of conditions," he said smiling. And furious with disappointment she turned on him like a tigercat.

"What I *think* I see, hey? Don't yer think I can't see me own mother?"

That, naturally, was beyond him. He simply stared at her. She grew angrier under that stare. He wanted his eyes opened, he did. He'd talked a lot of rot and yet didn't know a thing. She wanted to shake him up, hurt him. She began to tell him about Old Sookey and her intentions.

He didn't understand at first. He thought she was merely expressing rebellion against a mother who was forcing her to take some sort of work she objected to. It was not hard to make that mistake. Sookey treated the ugliness of the thing as a matter of course, her main moral flare was entirely against Old Sookey's exploiting her. If, now and then, she seemed to say things that made him wince, he put that down to the native exaggeration and clumsiness of expression of her kind. Moreover, she was talking about her mother, and it was not possible for him to connect a mother with the things Sookey wanted him to realize.

Sookey saw his lack of perception, her mind grew more bitter, she made her statements plainer and plainer, and obtained a savage pleasure in seeing his embarrassment grow.

And yet he couldn't credit what he heard. He actually stammered:

"Of course it's hard. But we can't always pick and choose, you know. A lot of us have to do work we hate. . . ."

Her eyes blazed at him. The silly chump. He was as thick-headed as a brick wall. He didn't see what she meant.

"Work," she snarled. "I don't mind work. It's being ruined just to please 'er pocket. . . ."

He felt this was beastly. Really, if she wasn't exaggerating she was talking in a horrible way.

"Yers," she said savagely. "Don't yer know wot *that* means? 'Aven't yer never 'eard o' girls being ruined before?"

"My God," he said, believing what he saw in her eyes if her words seemed incredible.

He stood staring horrified until the shiny, seedy figure of Herbert Young moved right up to him.

CHAPTER IX

HERBERT YOUNG appeared before Paul Geneste like a sly and degenerate ghost.

The evening had darkened to a soft wine-coloured dusk through which swathes of light mist drifted like bands of opal dust. It was within some twenty minutes of the closing time of the park. The Dell was empty save for the most lingering of lovers.

Herbert Young felt that his opportunity was an excellent one.

He had dogged Young Sookey from Rye Street to the Dell, had seen her speak to the young toff, and had seen how he could be in pocket by it. Everything was in his favour. He had caught the pair alone in an arbour, that would support all implications of a clandestine meeting. The Dell was practically empty, so that there would be no interruptions. The toff was young and inexperienced, he would probably fly into a panic at the mere hint of scandal. He, Herbert Young, was an old hand in such mattters. He considered himself on velvet.

Paul Geneste looked up to see the ravaged and pulpy face leering into his with what he took to be a passion of anger. He had at once a sense of peril as well as evil. He said, not without anxiety, though curtly enough:

"What do you want here?"

"You know," said Herbert Young apparently in an ungovernable rage. "That's my daughter—an' I'm going to charge you."

"Are you drunk or mad?" asked the amazed and uneasy Paul Geneste.

"You'll soon know," growled Herbert Young. "I caught yer at it—an' she an innercent girl!"

Paul began to understand. "You foul dog!" he roared, and he made a step towards Herbert Young.

Herbert Young knew exactly how long to stand his ground, and he stood it now. "None o' that," he said vengefully. "A shout brings a parkkeeper, don't forget. 'Sides, don't you force me to lay a 'and to you meself. The lor will see to that."

Paul Geneste stopped dead, feeling suffocated, feeling trapped. He'd heard of cases of this sort before. Had Sookey deliberately acted as bait?

"Yus," snarled Herbert Young. "Better think twice before yer add to it be striking the pore girl's father too. Wot 'ave you ter say fer yerself, yer cur, before I call the police?"

"Punch 'is face in," said Sookey sharply. She had expected that to happen before. Paul's pause revolted her because she thought it cowardice.

Herbert Young swung on her. "Shut yer trap, Young Sook," he snapped. "I'll 'ave a word ter say to yer later—me an' yer pore mother will."

Sookey almost screamed at the duplicity of the man. She shrilled: "Don't you listen to that blinking liar, Mr. Geneste. He ain't nothing to do with me. It's a try-on. . . ."

"Yes, I think we've had about enough of this," said Paul, fighting for his nerve, and hoping he looked determined. But so practised a hand as Herbert Young was not deceived. His broken teeth bared, he said:

"Yers, we 'as, an' the sooner we puts you where you belong the better."

Ostentatiously he backed from the arbour into the pathway outside, ostentatiously he craned his head this way and that, as though looking for a keeper. Then he shrank furtively,

and with his strange slithery quickness slipped back under the cover of the arbour.

Bert Tavener followed him in.

"Bert!" cried Sookey in a gasp of surprise. "Bash this swine!"

Bert Tavener was as steadily calm as ever. Paul Geneste was surprised at his appearance, but Sookey was not. She guessed that if Herbert Young had followed her, Bert, seeing it from the football ground, had followed Herbert Young to see that he did no mischief. That was exactly what Bert had done. He had, however, arrived at the arbour as a neutral. He had heard voices and he guessed more or less what was happening, but until he had heard Sookey's voice raised in furious denunciation of Herbert Young, he had not known whether it was a put-up job between the girl and her father or not. He did not think it was, but such things did happen among the citizens of the Gardens, and he had learned to remain outside. Now that he had heard Sookey he was here to interfere on her behalf, but whether he disapproved or approved of Herbert Young's methods of fleecing a young fool could not be told from his face.

"Up to your old tricks, Herbert Young?" he said.

"If his old trick is blackmail, he is," said Paul Geneste in a short, crisp voice that made all three look sharply at him. All were surprised, one was dismayed, two admired. All recognized that this youngster, who had been thrown off his balance for the moment, had in a surprising way recovered decision and courage. Sookey vaguely understood why she had felt that that ugly face had force and character.

Herbert Young realized it too, yet he realized he had good cards in his hands. Not one of them wanted to be mixed up in a police affair. He could still hold the fear of that over them.

"You get outter this, Bert Tavener," he snarled. "This is my business. Sling yer 'ook."

"That's my message to you," said Bert, moving subtly closer and watching his man with the casual wariness of his profession.

"Get to blazes outter 'ere," yelled Herbert Young in a purposely frightening manner. "I'm calling the perlice."

The inexperienced Paul Geneste forced the issue. "I think we'd better teach this ruffian a lesson," he said, and advanced on the man.

"Do yer?" snarled Herbert Young, and he opened his mouth to yell.

Bert Tavener made a quick, fluent stab forward. His whole body seemed to close in upon Herbert Young with a shadow softness. His right arm made a six-inch jab. The mouth that was about to shout merely uttered a grunt that was like the tearing of tissues. Herbert Young drooped forward on to Bert's arms, and the boxer with a familiar ring movement shoved him clear with the lifting forearms. Herbert Young fell back among the bushes by the bench, rested against them for a moment, and slithered to the ground.

Sookey laughed. Bert grinned casually. Both knew that the skill and precision of Bert had stifled Herbert Young's shout at the psychological moment—and given him something to think about too. Paul Geneste said: "By Jove!" Stared, then moved quickly to Herbert Young's side.

He knelt. They saw his fingers, queerly assured fingers, play over the man's skin. They saw him lift an arm, watched its limp negative fall. He lifted the head, and the head rolled free. Then Paul Geneste slipped his hand under waistcoat and shirt, and remained there during a dreadful pause.

The silence of the Dell seemed to come down upon them with a stark, crushing pressure.

Paul Geneste stood up, freeing his hand; he remained staring down at Herbert Young's strange inertness. Deliberately avoiding Sookey's eyes he looked at Bert Tavener.

Bert Tavener made a curious croaking noise in his throat.

"Yes," said Paul Geneste evenly. "He's dead."

CHAPTER X

THEY stood for a moment in the terrible deep silence over the body of the dead man.

"His heart must have been rotten," said Paul Geneste huskily. "I saw it on his face when he came in here. I ought to have realized it."

Bert Tavener licked his now whitish lips. He said in a voice that broke and croaked: "I didn't hit him so hard. That punch wouldn't kill a man."

"It was his heart. It was rotten—the life he'd led from the look of him."

"He was a proper swine," said Bert. "Nuthin' he didn't do. . . . But that punch wouldn't have hurt him."

"If his heart was rotten anything would," said Paul Geneste. "Where did you hit him?"

Bert silently indicated a point on his own body. Coat, waistcoat, shirt must have muffled that punch, yet Herbert Young had died.

"No, it oughtn't to have killed him," said Paul. "I don't suppose it'll even show. . . . But that heart of his . . ."

They were talking with a dreadful strained casualness, aware and yet unable to realize the enormity of the things that had happened to them of all people in the world. Bert Tavener still had his casual and aloof bearing, but there was a queer whiteness about his eyes, and beads of sweat stood on his upper lip. Sookey stood petrified, but part of the spell holding her helpless was rage at Herbert Young and the trouble he had got her into. Both of these were numb with the fear of the one thing that could terrorize them—the law. The

death of a man meant little, but the power of the law was the inexorable millstone of God.

They stared at the doctor's son. It was strange how these denizens of a slum who had felt scorn for the softness of this superior being now relied upon Paul Geneste. Strange how he justified that reliance. He was pale. They could see he was trembling a little, but his will was still in command, and it dominated the situation. If they were to get out of this he was the one to get them out of it.

He said hoarsely: "Well, he's dead. We can't get away from that. We'd better go and tell the police."

Bert made a slight fearful movement, Sookey gave a little gasp. Paul himself felt nausea. Only with the mention of the police did he realize all that this was to mean to him.

"It's ghastly," he said hesitantly. "Of course it was an accident. . . . We can prove that. In the ordinary way the man would not have died. . . . There's nothing really against us. And, after all, the beast forced it on us. . . ."

He stopped dead. He felt ill. What a story to get about. He, Paul Geneste, to be mixed up with a slum girl, and the killing of her bully—not her fault, of course, but that was how the papers would look at it. What other construction could they put on the story? What would people say? What would it mean to his mother—to his father's practice? What would it mean to his own career? Like Sookey, he was hating the dead man.

Sookey said breathlessly: "Nobody see'd it done."

His mind leapt at those words. As a doctor's son he knew what he ought to do. The sensible thing to do was to go straight to the police, and yet Sookey's words came as a ray of hope. It was a fact that they were utterly cut off here in a practically empty park. He doubted whether anybody had seen Herbert Young come to the arbour. He looked swiftly at Bert Tavener. Bert said hoarsely:

"There was nobody on the path outside. Nobody all the way from the gate."

"An' the keeper won't see 'im layin' there," said Sookey fiercely. "'E won't be found till the morning."

Paul Geneste saw that both Sookey and the man Bert were only thinking of getting out of this before somebody came and found them with the dead body. Their instinct was to bolt without a thought of the future. He knew he alone was capable of doing the thinking. . . . And yet the only things he could think of were the chances of getting out of this detestable mess without suspicion and publicity.

"You sed," Sookey told him, "that there wouldn't be a bruise."

"No, I don't think there will be," he said. "The clothes would prevent it. . . . It wasn't so much the blow as his rocky heart that finished him. . . . Even if there were a bruise it might look as though he had fallen against the bench. . . . He might have got up from it, feeling a heart attack coming on, and fallen against it. . . . And then fallen among the bushes."

No doubt he ought to see difficulties ahead, but he could not. All he could see was that there was a very good chance of getting out of this without anyone knowing a thing about it. He saw their eyes watching him. The desire in their eyes was contagious. They were ready to run the risk, anyhow.

"If—if this hadn't happened it might look—when they found him in the morning—as though he had died from heart failure. That often happens," he said.

He gathered their eyes, saw relief in them.

"We'll get out of this," he said with decision.

They moved towards the mouth of the arbour. Bert put his head outside. "All O. K.," he said.

"Just a minute . . . if it does come out," said Paul.

"We must tell a story. . . . This fellow was a wrong one?"

"'E was a swine," said Sookey. "'E was trying to get hold o' me. 'E tried it the other day only Bert stopped 'im. Everybody knows wot 'e was. The perlice too."

"That's right. He had hold of Sookey, was dragging her off when I came up," said Bert, looking at Paul. "That's the ticket."

Paul nodded. His relief was immense.

"That's the story we will tell. We heard a girl scream. We both ran up—from different directions mind. You from the direction of the gate. I from the next arbour, where I was reading." Paul remembered his books, suddenly picked them up. Heavens, how near he'd been to leaving them behind! He went on. "We saw Sookey here struggling with the man. She appealed for help. Trying to take her away this happened—either as a result of a blow, or because the man fell against the bench as he tumbled into the bushes. Remember we've got to be vague about that. We don't know what sort of mark will show—if one does—on the man's body. Of course, we were too concerned about getting the girl away to pay any attention to him. We thought him merely winded and left him there. . . . You understand that? We didn't know he was dead. . . . But I think they'll put his death down to heart failure. . . . Anyhow, we've got to risk it. I can't think of anything else. Can you?"

They couldn't. Sookey, because she felt he had said all that need be said. Bert, because outside the ring he always left management to superiors.

They moved out of the arbour.

"We must separate," said Paul. "And look here, where can I see you if it should be necessary?"

He spoke to Bert. Bert answered: "I'm gen'rally kicking a football about down be the end of The Green."

They separated, Paul heading for the gate that would lead him out by The Park, Sookey and Bert strolling towards The Green.

A lout lounging sullenly in an arbour about twenty yards away watched them go.

They had not seen him, they did not see him now because he was well back in the shadow, but he had been able to see the mouth of their arbour all the time. He had come to his own arbour because he had fixed up a meeting there with a servant girl. She had not come, and he had sat on sullen, partly in hope that she might appear, partly because he was too inert to move off.

He had seen Sookey go into the arbour. He had seen Herbert Young followed by Bert Tavener go in. Even though he did not know of the presence of Paul Geneste he guessed there would be some sort of dust up, for he knew the characters of all three.

He was surprised when he saw Paul Geneste come out as well as the others, for he knew the doctor's son by sight. His mind lazily tried to imagine what had happened when all these people had come together. He waited there for Herbert Young to appear. He waited until the bell that rang to signal the closing of the Dell's gates sounded.

Even then Alf Naylor had not the energy to pass the arbour in which Herbert Young's body lay. It was twenty paces out of his way. It wasn't worth the fag.

CHAPTER XI

HERBERT YOUNG's body was brought all the way from The Green down Rye Street to the police station in The Triangle on an ambulance, a policeman pushing it and all the youth of Goose Common following it.

Sookey did not see it. She wanted to. After a sleepless night in which she consorted with the gallows and hell and all other horrors, she was as nervous as a cat. She tried to go out, but Old Sookey brooding over her breakfast growled.

"You Sook—stay indoors. I wanttcher."

She said no more. Sookey lingered by the window as much as she could. Old Sookey sat moveless behind her, brooding, thinking.

She heard the yells from up the Gardens which gave news of the sighting of the ambulance. She saw the rush of the children go up to The Triangle, heard some of them yelling that it was "A Deader." She became so nervous that Old Sookey stirred sluggishly and deeply and calmly swore at her.

Only after a ghastly hour did Old Sook rise, don a mantle of many laminations and a leery bonnet, and lurch towards the door saying, only when she reached it: "Come on, you."

Sookey trailed after her. At The Triangle she dragged fearfully, casting frightened glances towards the police station. Only the policeman on point stood there, and he was bored.

Her mother ploughed on unheeding. She went up Rye Street, she went straight into a draper's shop considered by Cherry Pie Gardens to give the same goods as the better shops for half the price, walked straight to the dress department. Here she asked to be shown dresses for Sookey.

Sookey knew what that meant, knew that Old Sookey was

not blueing a considerable sum on a smart frock for nothing. She knew that her mother's plan for her was on the verge of fruition, but she could not rebel, could not even think about it. She could only wonder what was going on about that still, cold body in the police mortuary.

She could not attend to the choice and fitting. She ought to have been surprised and elated because Old Sookey was obviously putting the choice on her, was depending on her taste. That was really a triumph. Old Sookey, who never had been a fool, had realized that Young Sook had discrimination out of the ordinary—whatever the Gardens might think—and meant to make it serve her. Only when her mother stretched suddenly forward and gave her a clip on the side of the head did she manage to concentrate enough to select a frock. As she never recalled what kind of frock it was it does not matter.

That evening many people in the Gardens knew that a dead man had been found in Hern's Dell. Most hoped that it might give rise to an entertaining murder case, and strove to make it exciting with rumour. Sookey expected to hear the name of Herbert Young mentioned, and since it never was she began to fear more and more. She thought this a sure sign that the police knew there had been foul play, and were holding things back in order to trap the criminal.

As a matter of fact, although the police knew all about Herbert Young, they did not know him as Herbert Young. That name might have been his own or an alias, the police thought the latter, since he had served several terms of imprisonment under another name. Sookey had no means of knowing this, and her terror continued. It was increased by the action of Alf Naylor. Alf showed a strange interest in her. He stood against the police station wall and stared and stared at her.

Alf Naylor, who had heard about the finding of the body in the Dell, was putting two and two together.

On the next day the dress, which had had to be altered in the shop, came home, and dazed with anxiety Sookey put it on, and it was approved by her mother. Later in the day she heard Old Sookey refuse an invitation to join another woman for the "First House" at the local Hippodrome on the morrow. Dimly she realized that her mother had refused that attractive offer for no other reason than that her scheme for her daughter was due to function on the morrow. But she couldn't concentrate on that. She was still thinking of Herbert Young. What were the police doing about him? She was quite in the dark. There had been no mention of finding the body in any of the newspapers she could get hold of. It wasn't important enough for the papers to mention, but she did not know that. The silence was significant; the police were preparing evidence for arrest.

It was only that night that relief came—and then it wasn't relief. Alf Naylor, who had bought a paper on his way home from the paint and varnish factory where he worked, sidled up to her, put the sheet into her hands and pointed to a paragraph.

The paragraph was the report of the coroner's inquest held upon the body of Herbert Young. The name was quite different—but there was no mistake about it being Herbert Young. The verdict at that inquest was "Death from heart failure."

Sookey's heart jumped, and she felt the vast relief of freedom. She also felt a strong admiration and gratitude for Paul Geneste. How smart he had been. He had been able to tell exactly what would happen.

As a matter of strict truth, Herbert Young had been on their side all the time. Herbert Young having been in jail

had his record in the police files. On that record was his medical history, and the "rotten heart," the fruit of his vicious life, was duly noted. With that to guide the court the verdict was a foregone conclusion. Even the bruise on the body was put down to the man's falling on the bench when overcome, as Paul had suggested it might be. This was not mentioned in the report. Only the verdict was there, and that was good news enough. It was all over. They had come through safely.

Sookey started smiling, heard Alf Naylor's snigger, and for the first time realized that in drawing her attention to that report he had done a strange thing. She looked into his face, saw the craft and evil in it. He sniggered again.

"If they only knew wot *some* of us knew—eh, Sook? If they only knew wot *me* and you knows . . . ?"

He leered at her, his lips had an evil suggestion. He took the paper away from her and walked off. He did it with a slouch of swagger. He had put two and two together properly. He did not know what he meant to do, but he did know he had power over her. And he liked the idea of power. He remembered how she had chased him through the Gardens. He thought her extraordinarily pretty, too.

Sookey stood still for a full minute, then she swung out of the Gardens and went up Rye Street to the football ground.

Bert Tavener was kicking a ball about. He was as offhand as ever. He had seen the news already, he seemed neither elated nor otherwise.

He did not seem greatly disturbed when Sookey told about Alf Naylor, though he watched her with his cool steadiness as she spoke. "'E knows something," she said.

"Or pretends to," said Bert evenly.

"'E does. 'E must," she cried. "Why ever else did 'e

show me that paper, an' why ever else did 'e say that about if the perlice only know what 'im an' *me* knew. . . . 'E knows! 'E'll turn copper's nark."

"I'll have a word with Alf," said Bert evenly and grimly.

"'E may 'ave split already."

"No, he wants something out o' it," said Bert. "But I'll learn him somethin' first."

Sookey stood there going over the matter again, trying to get some comfort from Bert's "I'll have a word with Alf." She wanted to remain near him. In desperation she began on her mother. "She's got a swell dress fer me now. She's going to take me somewhere to-morrow——" she said. Then she stopped. "There's Mr. Geneste," she whispered.

Paul was coming towards them. He had read the verdict and was elated. In his elation, not only did he feel he wanted to talk to someone, but the doctor in him told him that his fellow-conspirators would be feeling that way, too. He realized the danger of that. He had made up his mind to have no intercourse whatsoever with them unless forced to, but now he felt he had to see them to warn them about the danger of giving themselves away in their relief.

As they started to walk towards him he turned over the grass, so that when they came together they were at a point so lonely that there was no chance of being overheard. Paul said it was a good thing the business had ended so satisfactorily, and began his warning. In the middle of it Sookey said: "But somebody knows. A chap down the Gardens, Alf Naylor, knows."

"Aw," said Bert, grinning at the alarm he saw leaping to Paul's face. "Don't you worry about that. I'm looking after Alf."

Paul worried about it very much. He had to have the whole story. He said: "It sounds like a shot in the dark.

It doesn't sound as though the brute really knew, he's probably only guessing."

"That's my idea," said Bert. "Anyhow, I know how to put it across Alf."

"Honestly?" said Paul.

"Crr! Yes . . . I can get him pinched, an' he knows it," said Bert calmly. In his off-hand way he told that he knew of a theft Alf Taylor had committed on a house shut up while the family was away on a holiday. There was no doubt about it. A word from him in the right quarter and Alf would go up for it. He practically convinced Paul that he had Alf in the hollow of his hand. Indeed, Paul's only anxiety was because of the effect of Alf on Sookey.

"Oh, Sook knows how to look after herself, don't you, Sook?" grinned Bert.

"I don't know," said Paul, with a chivalry that amused Bert. "To see that fellow every day, to have his threat hanging over her always—even if he doesn't speak, it'll be pretty awful. People break in time under that sort of thing."

Sookey felt that Paul Geneste was questioning her courage.

"Oh, I can 'old me own," she said stiffly.

Bert was staring at her.

"You were meaning to cut your lucky, anyhow, Sook," he said.

"If I can, yus," she said sullenly. "But 'ow can I?"

"I got a quid," said Bert surprisingly. "A quid and a dollar, as a matter o' fact." He put his hand in his pocket and held the coins across. "Go on, take it, you silly chump. I got it for you."

She stared at Bert. This was like Bert—unexpected. You thought he had forgotten the matter, passed it by in indifference, but all the time the thoughts were going on, and went on quietly and without fuss until he saw the way to manage things.

"Crr, Bert!" she gasped. "But you said you 'adn't——"

"Popped that cup I got for the Goose Common Championship at the baths," he grinned. "Could have got more on it, but I gotter get it back with the money I win when I beat Huik. The ole woman will smell something if I don't. She thinks the Boxing Club secretary has borrowed it to get another made like it." He was still holding out the coins. "Come along, Sook, you know you gotter get away from yer mother."

She took the money. "You're a sport, Bert," she said. "It was to be ter-morrow, anyhow."

Paul Geneste, who had grown red as he listened, broke in with: "Your mother—that's what you were telling me about when that ruffian came up. . . . Are you serious? I mean, things like that——"

"If you knew Old Sookey you wouldn't need to ask," said Bert scornfully. "Young Sook's gotter get away."

"But what will you do, Sookey—you're only a child?"

"I can look arter meself," said Sookey boldly, though rather terrified at the step she must now make. "I'll—I'll get a situation."

Bert said calmly, looking straight at Paul Geneste:

"If she had some more cash she could manage it safer."

Paul blushed under the steadiness of those eyes, his hand flew to his pocket.

"I've got three pounds," he said. "No, three pounds fourteen. . . . Better call it three pounds, though, I've got to get through this week, and—and it's not a time to answer questions at home. Three pounds," he held them out nervously to Sookey. "Will that do?"

"You're a toff," cried Sookey, and she took it without any of the reluctance she had shown towards Bert. Her sort were accustomed to taking what they could from the superior race.

"Have you got a definite plan?" asked Paul.

"Don't you worry, sir," she said—the money had begot the "sir." "I'll find a job all right."

Bert said calmly:

"You'll slip out fust thing to-morrow. We'll buy a box an' then you'll buy some clothes. But you'll save a quid o' that money—that's got to keep you. Then you'll get right out o' Goose Common. I say the Ole Kent Road. You can get a room in one o' them turnings off the Ole Kent Road. . . . Get one near one o' them paper shops what get girls places. You can tell the people in the paper shop—an' the woman at your rooms—that you come up from the country. You lives in Kent somewhere, see, an' your parents is dead, so you've come up to London to try your luck. You haven't any references, but you're willing. I bet you get a place all right an' no questions arsked."

"I bet I do," said Sookey boldly, elation and timidity swaying within her like a balance.

"First thing to-morrow, then," said Bert, rising. "I want to have a kick about before it's dark. So long."

"Right-o, fust thing," said Sookey. She looked at Paul. "So long, Mr. Geneste."

"Good-bye—lots of luck," said Paul.

He went off remembering the queer good looks and the sharp individuality of her face. But he had made no attempt to shake hands.

CHAPTER XII

"WHERE y'h agoin'?" bellowed Old Sookey.

She dropped a pair of silk stockings on to the pink stays topping the ghastly bridal pile on her bed. Her swift, impressive bulk hurled into the living-room.

Sookey at the dresser stifled a scream. Only her instinct enabled her to turn a gaping, innocently amazed face over her shoulder.

She said, with the wonder of astonishment: "Ain't I gotter go rhand to Liza Tull fer 'arf 'n' egg-cup o' mustard?"

She lifted the egg-cup from the dresser, she moved towards the door.

She must be cool, casual. She must not overdo it though. Her mother was like a cat ready to pounce. With the sacrificial raiment already spread on the bed she meant to take no risks with the victim. Sookey knew that her enslavement or freedom depended upon her nerve.

She could feel her mother's eyes boring into her shoulder blades. She knew that the fact that she was without a hat, was wearing the worse of her two blouses did not really quell the suspicions of Old Sook. She could almost feel her mother making up her mind to forbid her leaving the house.

As Old Sookey cleared her throat to speak, Sookey stifled her command by stopping. She put the egg-cup on the table. From the seat of the chair near the window she picked up her mother's dirty breakfast cup. Her sniff indicated her opinion of her mother's tidiness. Old Sook, in fact, had finished her meal enjoying the drama of a quarrel between a man and his wife out in the Gardens.

Sookey took the cup to the sink and placed it among other

dirty crockery. She came back with a superb casualness she did not feel. She lifted the egg-cup that was to be the grail of borrowed mustard on her way to the door.

Artistry had saved her. Instinct had bluffed Old Sook. That by-play with the breakfast cup seemed too everyday, too humdrum for a mind contemplating flight, and her mother did not want to engender suspicions just then. She bit back admonitions, just growled: "No 'angin' abart nar. I may wanttcher any minnet."

"Orl ri'," said Sookey, and stalked indifferently into Cherry Pie Gardens.

It was thus that Sookey and one egg-cup were lost to the dominion of Old Sookey for ever.

CHAPTER XIII

Five hours after her flight per egg-cup, Sookey, as Sookey Lee, was maid-of-all-work to Mrs. Wilhelmina Stoach, lodging-house keeper, Arcadia Road, Old Kent Road.

It had been easy. It had even been thrilling once she had regained that courage which seemed to have oozed right out of her at the mere act of taking her momentous step. But only in after years did she realize how much she had owed to Bert Tavener in the matter of regaining her nerve.

Bert had indolently materialized out of the crowd near the stopping place of the trams and buses. His calm hands were in his pockets, his ever unflurried eyes examined her with his off-hand and steady gaze.

He saw "the jumps" written on her white, strained face. He became the abounding dunderhead at once. There is nothing that pulls an intelligent girl together more quickly than the need of knocking sense into a blockhead.

Bert opened with: "You ain't got a hat, Sookey?"

"Wonder I got me skin," she snarled with pallied ferocity.

"You got a egg-cup though," he grinned.

"Damn th' egg-cup!" she cried with a sob. She flung it into the gutter with such fervour that a flying particle struck the plump leader of local anarchy so powerfully that he jumped a foot and looked round for the police to protect him from what he thought must be one of his own bombs.

From that point Bert's calm and brilliant idiocy slowly whipped her will into fighting activity.

His foolishness in suggesting that they should do their shopping in Rye Street, and then go straight to the Old Kent Road, spurred her to explain tartly to him how a really first-

class intelligence would throw Old Sookey off the trail by taking a tram to Kennington, shopping there, taking another tram to the Elephant, changing again, and then, via the New Kent Road, reaching their destination to the complete confusion of pursuit.

He said: "Lummy, it beats me how you think o' such things," and thought out his next folly. This was to buy the box first, and clothes after.

Sookey, who now had fought her way clear of dry sobs, scorched him for that. A pretty pair o' ducks they'd look lugging a tin box from shop to shop. Clothes came first, box last as anyone would see. Bert grinned and went on as calmly as he could without showing his hand, and under the stimulus of her own mental superiority Sookey's assurance grew.

Easy after that.

The ancient of Israel who sold them the box also allowed them to use his parlour for packing the few clothes their money had bought, and for changing into the blouse that Sookey thought horrible but becoming to the state into which she had been hurled. The Jew seemed indeed to appreciate their lack of place to lay their box. No doubt he had had an instinct for haphazard passage and packing in his blood from the days of the Wandering in the Desert—and that, by the way, may explain why it is that all sellers of second-hand trunks are Jews. The ferment of that ancient moving-on gives them, no doubt, their strange predilection for kit-bags.

By three in the afternoon they and the tin box were in the untidiest sweetstuff and newspaper shop on earth, and asking for two things:

(i) A sittcherwaytion for a willing girl.

(ii) A bedroom for a single woman.

The shop dealt in both—and everything else the dizzying mind could conceive.

Its fuddled and dusty window was sick with Penny Bloods and toffy-apples, *Police Budgets* and All-sorts which was a sweet mixture foaled from the ends of many manufacturers' tins), "comics" and stick-jaw, blow-flies and aniseed balls, lucky-dips (a sweet to be sucked carefully for fear of destroying the hidden tin toy within), wooden carts and horses at one ha'penny each, rubber balls and cachous. . . . A jumble that even Balzac would have despaired to describe.

Strung in long, leery lines from the top of the window were numberless squares of paper, each solemnly and terribly hand-written. Each conveying such information as

Brit girl wanted.—Genl. work. Not afraid of work. Good posit. for willing helper. Apply within.

Bed-sit.—Nice house low terms. Suit city gent or young lady out all day. Use of bath if necessy. Real Home from home. Apply within.

Scores of these advertisements dangled temptingly, some fresh, hopeful and buoyant, some blotted, fusty and dejected as if they had lingered there for years, gradually losing all hope of a city gent.

Inside the shop was a morbid gloom and a long counter littered in a dog-eared snow of mixed periodicals. This counter made a vast L round the interior, and not only was its surface smothered, but the smother had begun to mingle with alien goods. The *Daily Graphic* had oozed over slabs of hard-bake toffy, and *Weldons* had obviously been on long illicit intimacy with jelly-jujubes.

An indefinite human of seven unwashed years was scattering much of an over-jammed crust upon a pile of *Chums*. He—she—*it* looked at them drearily. *It* went on looking, chumping jaws, scattering jam. Sookey said acidly: "Are you th' firm, or is there someone 'uman about? I'm looking for a place."

It bit hard, swallowed, went back to *Chums*. After *it* had read a joke it bawled "Shop!" in a shrill bi-sexual voice; went on reading, chewing and bawling "Shop!" at steady intervals. At the fifth "Shop!" a door at the back opened, and a woman in a smart peekaboo blouse and a sack apron appeared. As she wiped hands on the apron she smiled at Bert, showing three missing teeth and a gold one.

Bert said affably: "Me cousin from the country has come up to go into service. . . ."

"Not bin out before," said the woman, after one sharp glance at Sookey—to Sookey's fury. What was there about her that gave her away?

"No," said Bert. "She's willing. . . ."

"Try Mrs. Stoach, 13 Arcadia Road, second-lef'. That'll be a shilling."

"While I'm about it," said Sookey defiantly, "I'd better try one or two. . . ."

"Shillin'," said the woman indifferently, taking it. "Don't ferget the number. Tell 'er yer from McGinnises."

"What sort o' party is Mrs. Stoach——?" began Sookey.

"Gotter referunce? No. You try Mrs. Stoach, then. Tell 'er where you come from. Leave the box 'ere till you come fer it."

Sookey went to Mrs. Stoach suspecting exactly what Mrs. Stoach was. Her bones told her that Mrs. Stoach was the local hard case. She was the one woman in the district who could not keep girls. She was a sure source of income to Mrs. McGinnis, who sent servants to her promptly because she knew it would mean another shilling in her pocket in a few weeks' time.

When she saw the tall house with the despairing garden before it, its dirty steps, mulatto curtains and pocked door paint, she did not have to look at the printed card above the

broody aspidistra to know that single men were "taken in here."

She and Bert stared at the house from a safe distance. Bert offered the suggestion that it might do while a girl looked about her, that it had the appearance of a place where they would jump at any girl, reference or no reference—and on the nail. To be taken on at once would save lodging money, and also answering certain awkward questions the ladies who kept lodgings were bound to ask Sookey in the circumstances.

Sookey went down broken area steps, and in the half-gloom of a semi-basement breakfast parlour interviewed a woman whose mind as well as body seemed stayless.

She was a woman of vague, unhinged melancholy. She was the sort of woman who holds a jug of soured milk in one hand all the time she talks—as she did now. The milk, she said, had been delivered sour four days ago, but what with one thing and what with another, and her not being able to call her soul her own, she'd not been able to remember about it at the time of the milkman's call until to-day. She seemed wearily offended that Sookey wasn't the milkman.

She didn't even brighten up when she learnt that Sookey was a prospective maid. She said she supposed she oughter have a maid, since her hands were worked to the very bone nowadays, but girls being what they were, and these times being that hard, she didn't know whether she could stand another. With girls wanting as much as three shillin's the week one 'ad to be nothing less nor a gold mine to cope with things.

"My wages is three-an'-six," said Sookey, and prepared to do battle. Mrs. Stoach's curious light cobalt eyes, eyes that gave a queer white glare to her cinnamon-coloured face, blinked.

"You'd better 'ave a look at yor room," she said. "You'll

like yor room. One o' the best views in Sou' London. You c'n see the shunting at the Bricklayers' Arms Station any hour o' the day—*or* night."

They climbed endlessly through a house that had been designed by an architect who had sworn an oath of hatred against all servants. No other ambition could have gone into the making of that house.

The breakfast parlour was a half-buried tomb from which the coffins had been taken because they gave it too cheerful an air. Round angles, constructed to knock trays out of the most experienced hands, were the kitchen and scullery—behind the breakfast-room. These would have given oubliettes a pointer or two in the art of horror. They were dark, dank catacombs, but without a Christian virtue. Mrs. Stoach had also brilliantly smashed the gas-jet in each so that what seeing the human mole did must be done by the aid of the paraffin lamp, paraffin being so much cheaper than gas.

Dark stairs shot upward from here. They were steep stairs; the architect had also employed a devilish ingenuity on the treads. They were of that type so narrow that the only way to get up them without falling was to place the foot sideways.

Up and up they climbed through throes of exhaustion. Mrs. Stoach muttered limply: "That's the drorin'-room. I dust that . . . vaylluble china. But you mus' alwiys remind me to water the boy."

"The boy?" asked Sookey, wondering whether it was one of her duties to bath the lodgers.

"Me aspidistra. Didn't you see 'im in the winder?" Pant, pant upstairs, with the leg action that Charles Chaplin afterwards made famous.

"First front—Mr. Meggie," said Mrs. Stoach rather quickly. "First back—my bedroom. 'Arflandin'—me per-

sonal sitting-room." Upstairs again, the calf muscles beginning to stick through the skin like fractured bones, it seemed.

"Second front—Miss Claudine Atherell. The real lady. Genteel. Works in one o' the best West End dress 'ouses. Second back—Mr. Ditch," in a hushed voice. "That's 'im." "'Im" was a stout and rumbling snore. "Compositor. . . . Night shift on the *Daily Chimes*. No trouble, tho' 'e do 'av 'is breakfust at tea. Third floor front—Not taken. Keep yer 'ead low. This is yor room, me dear."

Sookey stood in an attic in which three slopes of roof seemed to be playing a game at which could come lowest. Under one slope was a bed. On the free wall by the door was a sepia-coloured washstand holding china that had an air of never having been used. A row of pegs on the door provided the wardrobe, and was the only other piece of furniture. The paper on the wall was in the last stages of some skin disease common to the sort of paper put in servants' rooms. Where a powdery, fungus-like blotch had not conquered there showed the remnants of animal-like flowers of vicious tendencies.

It was a ghastly room, but not to Sookey. It was a room to herself, a miracle of absolute privacy in a life that had never known any. She looked upon it almost with rapture. She looked out of the shallow dormer window with rapture. Although Mrs. Stoach was unaware of it, it was a striking view.

From it not only could be seen the Brangwynesque mass of the great Goods Station, but, over grotesques of chimneys and houses, across the green billows of Southwark Park could be seen a glimpse of the lofty sail-blanched spars and the painted smoke-stacks of vessels in the Surrey Commercial Docks. Rather a heady view. Sookey, who had never been

as high up as this in her life, who had never beheld anything so swinging and magnificent, was at once the captive of that view.

Mrs. Stoach, lifting the water-jug by the hand not holding the jug of sour milk, which she still carried, clicked her tongue at the water-mark of long departed fluid therein, said:

"Never bin out before, hey? Still, I oughter 'ave a reference. Yes, be rights I oughter."

"Why did the last girl leave?" asked Sookey thoughtfully.

"Still, *in* the circumstances," went on Mrs. Stoach rapidly, "an' seeing as we can sort o' oblige each other, me being short 'anded, we'll say three shillin's a week an' no questions arsked."

"Three-an'-six," said Sookey, and they eyed each other.

"A proper gold mine one 'as to be," sighed Mrs. Stoach, without desperation or rancour. "You gotter box, I suppose. All right. Get yer cousin ter bring it up. Miss Atherell is in at five. There'll be 'er tea. There'll be Mr. Ditch's. All in breakfus' parlour. Mr. Meggie, 'e's 'ome from ten to midnight—if then. You go to bed ten o'clock. Up six-thirty. One night a week out an' every third Sunday. An' I 'ope yor a God-fearing girl."

She blinked at Sookey. Sookey put the rope of feathers from no known bird, which she wore round her neck as a boa, on to the bed and went down to fetch her box.

CHAPTER XIV

When Sookey met the lodger named Meggie she realized why Mrs. Stoach had always passed him at a run when she had to speak of him.

She encountered him when she took a cup of tea in to him next morning, for he had returned to Arcadia Road at midnight—if then—the night before.

She was conscious of two flat black eyes regarding her from the pillows as she entered the room. When she went to pull up the blind, a soft and rather pleasant voice said languidly:

"Confound you, you little slut. Don't you know anything about the morning after the night before? Pull that blind down, darn you—half-way; it's unbearable, but it'll do."

Sookey had an impression of a very flat figure like a human board in the bed, of thin hands showing a startling carmine against the dingy counterpane, of a curious foreshortened face. She went towards the door quickly. The pleasant voice said:

"Wait a minute. Let's see if this tea is sugared enough."

"Five lumps," said Sookey, pausing by the door. "Mrs. Stoach put 'em in 'erself."

" 'Put them in herself.' Say it, you little alley cat. 'Put *th*em in *h*erself.' Aitches are there to be used. Say it, darn you."

Sookey said it. He stared at her like a joss, half up on elbow.

She detested Mr. Meggie at once.

There was something outlandish and baleful about him, that came from himself more than from the queer effect of his hands, stained through his work as a dyer.

There was an uncanny flatness about the whole of him.

His face was flat as well as his body. Flat broad nose, flat broad cheekbones, flattish skull, flattish slit of a mouth. He looked like some horrible backless mask. Even his sloe-black eyes had an air of shallowness and immobility.

He didn't drink his tea. The sweetness of his tea had nothing to do with detaining her. He wanted to look at her. He looked at her. He reached for a biscuit-coloured cigarette without taking that shallow, flat look off her. There was an unbearable Eastern inscrutability in that glance. Sookey hated it. She said:

"*Do* you want any more sugar?"

"You know that wasn't what I wanted," said his soft voice, and he laughed in a manner that suggested a hiss. "What's your name, beauty?"

"Ask Mrs. Stoach," said Sookey curtly, and left the room.

She was certain she heard his flat, soft, hissing laugh as she went up the stairs to Miss Claudine Atherell, and she felt a strange fear. This man intimidated her. His strange, black passivity was new and fearful. She could deal with ruffians coarsely degenerate or virile, but this soft, sleek immobility was deadly and snake-like.

She saw that Mrs. Stoach was under the same spell when the man came down to breakfast. He came down beautifully dressed, more beautifully dressed than Paul Geneste, the doctor's son. He had a machine for manufacturing creases in his trousers, and he put all his coats on hangers made to keep the lines correct. He had a little thin gold watch-chain and a thin gold watch. He wore a ring with a big dull jewel on the little finger of his left hand, and a flat ring of gold held his fine tie in place. He had a fine sense of perfection from black hair as flat as paint to his dapper little cloth-topped boots.

He fixed his strange glance on Sookey directly she appeared with his bacon and eggs, and she saw that Mrs. Stoach was struck to a queer stillness under that glance. Mrs. Stoach

seemed bated, hostile, yet afraid. She ordered Sookey away to the kitchen, and even as she spoke Mr. Meggie broke into his strange, soft smile. As she went out she heard the queerly sweet voice saying: "Oh, Mrs. Stoach, what do I owe you?" She heard the clink of many sovereigns, and knew wherein lay the man's power over the landlady.

Mrs. Stoach confessed to it later. She said that in her line one had to take the lean with the smooth. She said that there were certain things one did not like about Mr. Meggie, but, on the other hand, she wished every lodger paid his way like Mr. Meggie. Mr. Meggie was the real gentleman, and the real gentleman had his faults, to be sure. Mr. Meggie had a very good position. It was said, she had heard, that there were few gentlemen in the dyeing profession thought more of, or were more clever in using, blending and discovering dyes. One had to remember that whatever Mr. Meggie seemed, he *was* quite the gentleman and that his money was good.

All the same, Sookey loathed Mr. Meggie, and Miss Claudine Atherell said she "abombinated the man" too. Miss Atherell said this often and emphatically, though she did make a point of strewing herself in his path whenever she knew he was in the house. But that was not extraordinary. She did it to Mr. Ditch, the compositor, who, even in the opinion of the father of his own chapel, was no more to look at than a walrus sick with adenoids.

From what Sookey could see of Miss Claudine Atherell, and from what Miss Claudine herself ceaselessly confided, she was a strewer by nature and disposition. She seemed to strew herself before all the males in her West End shop and before casual men anywhere.

She revealed her outstanding gift for strew over her cup of tea on that first morning

She heaved her ribby, if befrilled, body upright from

among the sheets of her bed. She asked Sookey, in a voice so palpitating and yet slurring as to make Sookey think of golden syrup trickling fatly and richly from a spoon, to look out of the window and see if a *man* was waiting outside the house.

"A tall, slim creeture in blew," her voice lounged on. "Red waistcoat. A gooldun moostach—I think. *But quait* lovvely eyes. A terrible man." Maiden giggle here. "Followed me *all* the wey home lasst night."

"There *is* a man artside," said Sookey scornfully.

"Ooh, the forward creeture!" giggled Miss Claudine (but a little surprised). "I *knew* he would stop at *noth*ing. Isn't he *hand*some?"

"I dunno," grinned Sookey. "I lay 'e'd cut more of a dash if 'e 'adn't 'is broom an' dirt-pan with him."

"Broom!" echoed Miss Claudine. "Durt-pan!"

Slowly she congealed as she realized that Sookey was talking about a scavenger.

She glared at Sookey. She said slowly, haughtily, lingeringly: "Will you kandly place the tow-ell ovar the hot-water vessel, *please,* and leave the room without deelay."

Sookey, who had thought her a sloppy little baggage, was impressed. That high, uvula diction seemed to her Cherry Pie Gardens ears the authentic tone of a duchess.

She left in awe of Miss Claudine as a toff, but not as a danger, as Mr. Meggie was a danger. She had watched Mrs. Stoach's manner to the girl the night before. Mrs. Stoach had been willing to listen to gossip, but her eyes had been distant. She had even heard Miss Claudine say: "Reelly, Mrs. Stoach, it is ver-rey difficult. A gerl in my position has to have reelly good frocks. I'm reelly sorry to incommoud you . . . but next week, *reelly,* I shall liqueedate my liarbilities."

Sookey knew this Claudine's sort. She was a muddler.

She was the sort that lives on tick and is always behind. She knew that Mrs. Stoach cared little whether she went or stayed.

As for Claudine's frocks, Sookey thought nothing of them. The cut was good, the material was good, the sewing put into them—Claudine's—was beautiful, but in design and taste they hinted at a mind convinced that a three-coloured blancmange was the ideal of decorative beauty.

Claudine's name was really Alice.

Out of kindness to the millinery trade she had adopted this *nom d'aiguille*. It was also "so refeened." Claudine had visions of that name being sprawled in letters of gold across her own shop window: "Claudine. Gowns." It would be "very refeened."

Claudine was "very refeened" herself.

She was a tall, hipless girl, who made the most of Nature's defects by describing herself as "willerwy." The minimum of flesh clothed her small, citified bones, while the deep "V" of her tight-drawn blouses showed the palpable articulations of ribs and breast-bone. For those days she wore her skirts short. This was to make the most of her insteps and ankles, which were really pretty. For the same reason she was always flourishing hands and wrists.

Her complexion had the ethereal, green-tinged pallor of the anæmic. She made the most of this by adopting an air of sweet, weary wistfulness, and the nearer a man the sweeter, the wearier and more wistful she became.

She said publicly—before Mr. Meggie, for instance—that she hated men. She made it plain that her life was almost entirely occupied in evading the pursuit of man. In private she yearned for a fierce, cruel love of the type indulged in by the males of large biceps and gnarled, granite faces who were the heroes of the books she voraciously read.

Sookey was mesmerized by her hauteur, by the cloying

sweetness of her diction, the unparalleled distinction of her vocabulary, the lazy aristocracy of her manner. She listened willingly for the sake of the culture she thought lay therein, as Claudine slowly and ceaselessly oozed talk about men. It seemed to her that Claudine was well-bred beyond anything she knew—beyond her school-teacher, beyond Mr. Meggie, beyond even Paul Geneste. And, indeed, Claudine's accent was far beyond these—too far beyond anything to be quite a normal article.

But Sookey learnt from her. So quick, so apperceptive a nature could find value even in Claudine. Claudine regarded the aitch as a ritualistic, not to say sacred, symbol. When she said: "And ayh said to him, 'Are yew awhare yew have hold of my hand, Mr. Hender*son*. That is not per-mittad even between such friends as us . . .'" the solemnity of all the aitches, exposed and otherwise, was terrific.

Sookey began to master the aitch from sheer pleasure, which is the only true way of learning. Even Mr. Meggie noted the phenomenon. He tried to detain her by his bed one morning with a soft sibilance of talk. She said:

"I haven't heny time to hang about here, Mr. Meggie."

He stared his flat stare, laughed his silent hiss, murmured:

"Only one wandering aitch to-day, Sookey. You're coming along, my Rose of Romany."

"You mean the 'any,'" she said.

"I meant the 'heny,'" he mocked. "You're a good pupil of our cloying Claudine. Only don't become too close a gramophone record of her. You'd better try a course of me. You're rather a character, Sookey. With a little steering you'd go a long way."

"I'm steering straight," she snapped. "That'll get me all I want."

"Ah, and do you know what you want?" His flat, dark eyes gleamed with amusement.

Sookey's quick, intense eyes went beyond him, stared out through the dreggy atmosphere outside the window. Did she know what she wanted? Powerfully, if vaguely, she did. She wanted something tremendous—position, power, haughtiness, wealth, fine dresses and a perfection of life beyond South London. She saw herself a more glorious Claudine, queening it. . . .

"Aye," she frowned. "I want big money—that the likes of you earns for me."

"The Golden Calf," he grinned. "A girl as pretty as you can get there quicker by taking short cuts."

"I know all about your short cuts," she snapped.

"In theory, of course. You're still a good little girl, aren't you?" he smiled into her glare. "And you know about me too, eh? A wolf where girls as lovely as you are concerned, Sookey."

"Or a hy*h*ena," she jeered.

"That was a difficult one, wasn't it? Better stick to wolf on both counts—easier to say, and because wolves have no squeamishness. That's why I'm one, and you are one of the little girls I like to eat—as I daresay I shall some day."

His cool boldness made her fearful. She was conscious that he had a dark power not unlike that of Old Sookey. To tear herself free from it, she snapped:

"You'll 'ave to get a fresh set o' teeth then!"

The taunt got home, as she knew it would get home. An abrupt viciousness twisted the flat mask of his face. Incurably and abnormally vain in his natty person and clothes, his black and broken teeth—he dreaded the dentist's chair with an unfathomable dread—were a source of annoyance to him. Indeed part of the strangeness of his laugh arose from the fact that even in amusement he had learnt to keep his lips over his teeth.

"There speaks the congenital gutter-snipe," he snarled. "Get out of my room, you slut."

Sookey was for one reason sorry there must be war between her and Mr. Meggie. Mr. Meggie, the expert dyer, would be fascinating. His room when he was out was fascinating.

Against one wall was a table at which he worked on Sunday mornings. On it, like a tabernacle, was a box, the lid of which divided and opened as do folding doors. The shelves in this box were really racks holding a number of small corked tubes, each neatly labelled with the dye it held in solution.

Opening that box was like peeping into the home of the rainbow.

These slender tubes of pure and lucent dyes were more thrilling than jewels to the colour-enamoured Sookey. She used to stare at and handle the shining, glowing, glamorous array when she should be dusting, and her spirit stirred as the spirit is stirred by great music.

She used to begin her ecstasy with the glory of the yellows . . . common acid yellow, smooth butter yellow, canarin and tartrazine, which are orange yellows; Alizarin S (that was the label), which was orange with a pulse of red in it; Diamine gold, which is gold yellow. Yellows, they had for her a honey sweetness.

Then the miraculous blues. Azurine, which is a violet blue; night blue, Gentian blue, China blue, opal blue, Capri blue, which is a wonderful greenish blue like sunny seas; deep blues of all liquid and eloquent shades right the way to naphthyl blue, which is a florescent blue. And the blues seemed to merge into the gentle swoon of violets, the dark blue violet called Azo mauve, of which Prune Pure is another shade, and so on to Gallocyanin DH, which is bright violet; Regina purple, which is violet tinged with blood; Violaniline, which can be almost grey-black.

Wonderful colours with gorgeous names—Malachite

green, what beauty to go with its sea-green blue. Congo red and Nigraniline black; Magdala red, Rubin, Fuchsine, Saint Denis red, Rose Bengale, a bluish red, Anisidine scarlet. Names and colours made a music for her. She seemed mesmerized by sight and sound in one. She pored over them, wasted time over them, got them into her mind, these little rays and fillets of colours, for all the world as though they were notes of some haunting song the mind could never forget. And she never did forget; the memories of these colours were part of her genius when her day came.

Morning after morning the dreary shrillness of Mrs. Stoach would wake her from her adoration, Mrs. Stoach calling from the bowels of Old Kent Road wanting to know "Wot you up to now, Sook?"

When she guiltily came down Mrs. Stoach would stare at her with a sort of bland anxiety, say: "You bin 'anging round that Mr. Meggie's room. . . . Why do gerls do it?" She would then bite back comment and end: "Well, I do 'ope yor a God-fearing gerl, Sookey. I count on that."

CHAPTER XV

In time Sookey began to admit that Claudine "fair gave her the hump."

Claudine was a "freak." Claudine's one idea was man. She was entirely occupied by thoughts about man, adventures with man, of narrow escapes from man the girl-eater.

Sookey had never been particularly thrilled by the sex. She had seen too much of the male in the raw; had had first-hand experience of these strong, violent, seducing animals Claudine thought so much of.

Claudine and her obsession gradually made her sick. For Claudine the voluptuously enamoured of man was as timid as a fish before the male.

She yearned for one of her powerful heroes to crush her in his arms, to seize her by force and make her swoon in rapture with savagery of his desire—as all the heroines of all her books swooned in rapture.

She wanted to be helpless, utterly at a man's mercy, yet she was so scared at the mere chance of physical contact that she'd run a mile from a hearty handshake, as Sookey put it.

Sookey had seen her do as much from Bert Tavener.

Sookey had not wanted to introduce her to Bert, but Claudine had seen to that. Sookey in a weak moment had spoken of Bert, who, though engagements were taking him out of London, came to meet her on her evenings out to give her news of Cherry Pie Gardens.

"A *boxer!*" Claudine had cried. "How *aw*fully thrilling. He must be terribly strong. And brutal."

"Well, 'e's strong," admitted Sookey.

"How his great arms must crush one . . . o-o-o," said Claudine.

"They don't crush *me*," snapped Sookey. "Bert an' me ain't got no time for the crushing business."

"I've dreamed of a man like that," sighed Claudine romantically, and Sookey went off in a hurry to do a job she would not have remembered otherwise.

One evening when Claudine came breathlessly into the house, she panted dramatically: "Quick, shut the door. There's a man outside. I can't shake him off. . . . Look, that tall man there with the green cap."

"I'll shake him off," grinned Sookey, looking at the man with the green cap.

"You!" said Claudine, in her best duchess to a servant girl manner.

"You bet," grinned Sookey. "That's Bert Tavener I tole you abart. He's waitin' fer me."

Claudine went with dignity to her room. Ten minutes later, as Sookey went up to get her hat, she met her going out again. She was going to get a fashion paper. Sookey thought nothing of that. Claudine was very much occupied with fashion papers about then. She studied them with painful concentration because she was in danger of losing her job. Skilled as she undoubtedly was in certain branches of dressmaking, she had no imagination whatsoever in the matter of design or colour.

Sookey thought nothing more about the girl until she got to the end of Arcadia Road, when she and Bert ran into Claudine. Sookey knew at once that Claudine had waited there purposely to meet her, and the reason she did it was to get an introduction to Bert of the crushing arms.

Sookey did introduce then. While Claudine was being sweetly lady-like to the calmly bewildered Bert, Sookey said

maliciously: "'Old on a minnit 'ere, Bert; I want to run across the way to buy something."

She saw that Claudine was immediately panic-stricken. She saw that the mere thought of being left alone with those crushing arms filled her with terror.

She backed away; she would have run, only Bert, striving to be polite, held her in talk.

Sookey watched the pair through the shop door. She saw Claudine backing along the railings like a frightened hare every time Bert stepped nearer to catch her low voice above the din of the street. And at each step her eyes became more scared. If ever there was picture of a Sabine woman facing a hungry Roman, Claudine was it.

In the end she jumped so blindly that she fell over the end of a pram, and would have transfixed the sleeping baby with the spike of her elbow had not Bert caught her arm.

At the mere touch of those strong fingers Claudine almost did the swoon she had read about with such rapture. Her eyes closed, her pale face went back, she swayed. Sookey hoped it would be into the arms of the bewildered Bert. But fright was stronger in Claudine than glamour. She tore herself away and with an incoherent farewell bolted. She did it with such speed that, though it was not exactly running, her dress flicked so high at each stride as to expose her calfless legs.

"Who's the skirt who is Queen of England one moment and a scared gazelle the next?" asked Bert, when Sookey rejoined him.

"That's the woman you men won't leave alone," grinned Sookey.

Bert's calm eye was on her: "I noticed it. . . . She gave me the glad eye all the way from the Kent Road to your house. I thought it was all over with me barring putting up the banns—until she came out again."

"She came out because it would be so *aw*fully thrilling to meet a brute of a basher who has arms what can crush a poor girl—luvely."

"*That* sort of man-maddener, eh?" said the off-hand Bert.

"She's dotty on the crumpet about men, an' she's a bit of a natural error all round if you ask me."

"Seems classy, though. Talks like a duchess an' dresses like the top o' a box of chocolates."

"That's not her fault," said Sookey acidly.

That was one of the secrets Claudine had given away.

Claudine, in spite of her superior airs, in spite of her pretence of being an authority on taste and dress, in spite of her assumption that in these things she was on the heights above a mere little drab of a lodging-house servant, was a fraud.

Sookey had been talking a good deal about dress to Claudine lately, partly because Sookey was always ready to talk about dress and colours, but mainly because Claudine was anxious about herself as a dress designer.

Claudine had first used Sookey as an audience for the airing of grievances. Claudine had many.

She was employed by a small firm in Oxford Street, and had been honoured as a designer and maker of dresses up to this. Her skill in certain respects was undeniable—with her needle, for instance, and in seizing upon and applying the suggestions of other people. Because of this she had reckoned herself the "brains" of the firm, or of "mhy West End peeple—such common, vulgar, money-grabbing, tasteless brutes, mhy de-ear."

Through her duchess manner she had been able to impose upon them because she had worked with another girl who had imagination. Now that girl had obtained a post in another establishment, and Claudine's "peeple" were beginning to realize that whatever her opinion of herself she had no brains at all for that most important branch of the work—creating

costumes of novel design and colour scheme. Nor did she have any ideas beyond the old puff-sleeved, epaulette type of dress, which was, thank goodness, just beginning to suffer its decline.

It was not an august firm, but it did like to make a show of keeping abreast with the times, and when her "peeple" looked upon the confections she turned out they began to ask her if she thought she was acting as designer to Mrs. Noah.

Claudine railed at these people, at their native coarseness which forbade them appreciating the elegance of her designs, of their utter lack of taste, of their vulgarity which tried to force her exquisite perceptions into pandering to crude, vulgar ideas.

They and the advance of fashion and all the world were wrong, and Claudine their martyr. Yet, rail as she liked, it could not blind her to the fact that events were moving along lines that must end in what Sookey called "the noble order of the boot" for her.

She was anxious. Since she must air her anxieties to someone, and she dare not do it to Mrs. Stoach, whose thoughts might turn to the consideration of future rent, she talked to Sookey.

She had noted Sookey's love of beautiful colours and materials. She lured the girl into her room in the slack hours of the evening on the plea of showing her a pattern of some new dress-fabric. There at the table of her bed-sitting-room with her thin forearms rising out of a multicoloured sea of tulle, chiffon, mousseline de soie, glacé silk, moiré velours, satin charmeuse and the rest, she would talk and talk of the impossibility of serving Philistines who thought that future fashions would have less and less to do with bell skirts and leg-of-mutton sleeves.

At first it was undiluted harangue, with Sookey listening indifferently, content to let her long fingers play with the

lovely, swift feeling stuffs on the table. But in time Claudine had her moments of attention.

This began when Sookey happened to take the side of Claudine's "people" in a matter of colour arrangement.

"What can one say to such brutes!" wailed Claudine, exhibiting the bodice under discussion. "One is inclaned to dis-pair. Any person of real taste would know that with a blew like this . . ."

Sookey's sense of values could not stand that.

"I dunno," she said doggedly. "I guess I'd have used this green myself." She lifted a piece of apple-green material, and laid it reverently against the blue, her mind registering a tiny shock of joy at the mere music of the contrast.

Claudine also experienced a shock: "How ghas-tly!" she said. "Don't you see that that makes it almost—vulgar?"

"Rats!" said Sookey, scornful in her sense of absolute fitness. "It's got a *real* look. Tucked like this, gored. . . ." She took a strong breast stroke as it were, into the sea of structure, design and colour, her symphony opening out for her in an exquisite, decisive whole as she worked. She was on fire, she was eager, the creative desire within her was lifting her on with the strange certainty of the creative impulse. She forgot all about Claudine, who was staring at her arrangement of materials in an attitude of outraged refinement—and shrewd assessment.

"That's how I'd do it," said Sookey, gloating over this lovely thing she had roughly fashioned.

"No fichu!" cried Claudine in horror.

"Don't want no fichu; that'd spoil it, make it too fussy," said Sookey. "Leave the colours be by themselves. That's the way I'd do it if I had my way."

"No doubt," said Claudine contemptuously. "But *ayh* design for the West End, not Old Kent Road or the New Cut."

Sookey left the room sullenly. She had been thrilled by that trifle of creative design as she had been thrilled by nothing else in her life. It had been her first real chance of manipulating lovely colours and lovely fabrics, and the artist in her had responded deliciously. Even Claudine's attitude did not touch her beyond confirming her opinion that the dressmaker was a chump. Her sulkiness came from the fact that the chump should have the chances of handling those materials and not herself. If she had the opportunity she'd show 'em something.

She was wrong in thinking that she had no opportunities. She had plenty in the next few months. Claudine saw to that.

In spite of her sneers, in spite of an antagonism arising out of the fact that a mere servant had designed the thing, she was not blind to the originality of Sookey's conception and colour arrangement. Naturally timid of novelty, her one real qualm about stealing it came from the fact that she had never seen anything quite like it before. But she knew it was like those novelties just then breaking down the noble ideal of the wasp waist and the mantel-board scheme of woman's upper works. Though she called them atrocious, it was merely because of her own inability to create such garments.

Because of the originality and freshness of Sookey's scheme she was inclined to reject it. Because her "peeple" had been particularly downright that day about her own design, had dropped hints that were frightening, she in desperation resolved to try it. She did; she was almost angry at the praise her "peeple" gave her for it. They said: "We can do with a lot more like this, Miss Atherell. You've struck a corking line at last."

Rebellious but shrewd she set herself to get a lot more like that. From thence on it did not seem possible for her

to retire for the night without having a chat with Sookey. She even lured Sookey into her room with chocolates or presents of pieces of dress-material.

Man was less often the subject now, the talk always drifted round to dresses. Claudine managed Sookey with a certain soft, oozy cunning. She learnt how to draw her out. The production of a new lovely colour or fabric would do it, and she knew how to hold her tongue once Sookey was on fire, save for the word here and there that would help the untechnical servant girl, or better, the word of opposition that would spur her to greater flights.

Sometimes she almost overdid this lofty indulgence of the West End expert listening to the callow suggestions of a mere servant wench. Sookey had a quick suspicion when she thought she was being laughed at, and a quicker resentment at being laughed at by a girl she thought to be a fool. Claudine nearly spoiled her first great triumph this way. "I've got an Old Kent Road taste, have I?" Sookey snapped on this particular evening. "Well, I'd a long sight rather 'ave it than yours. . . . An' I notice you're not above listening hard to it."

For a moment Sookey had a faint, a very faint suspicion of the saccharine Claudine. For a moment Claudine had a terrible fear that she did have that suspicion.

She flung her bony arm round the young, firm body, hugged it—Claudine was ready to hug anything—cried in her silkiest manner:

"Don't be such a silly, Sookey. Of course I *love* to talk frocks with you. I love it better than talking to any other girls. There's something about you . . . I don't know, but I just love these evening chats. And just talking. It's *so* helpful . . . *you* know. Just speaking about these things, about one's worries with one's peeple seems to help one. As we sit here and talk I sometimes see where I've made a mis-

take, and I've been able to go back fresh to what I was doing."

Archly: "And I don't want to make you a proud little gerl, *but* I've actually been able to make use of some of your little ideas. . . . Not as you told them. Oh, no. But they've given me a sort of line; I've been able to embody some of them into smart designs. Think of *that*, Sookey; some of your little ideas have gone into quait swell dresses. I always say that peeple like me should miss nothing, that they should pick up tips from any source—any. Just an idea that is of no importance to you can sometimes be adapted into something worth while. I do feel that you are *so* helpful in that way, Sookey. That's why I'm grateful. . . . The dress-material and so forth I gave you. . . . Even for small hints I like to show that I act fairly. I'm great on fairness and justness. I would not be happy if I felt that I had made use of even the tiniest tip without making some reeturn. I can't help being fair; it is my natchure. What were you saying you'd do with this material?"

Sookey disentangled herself from the bony hug. She did not like Claudine at all at the moment; she thought her slithery. She did not want to say what she would do with this wonderful flame-coloured fabric Claudine had brought home—a chump like that would not understand—only she could not stand against the allure of that glorious stuff. The flame of its loveliness seemed to light up her soul. The mere thought of this she-ass mishandling it with her "berthes" and "godets" and deep panels and cloudlets of tulle and the rest set her in revolt. Revolt goaded her to expression, her fine, quick, intense, piquant face glowing as she warmed to the theme.

Let colour as beautiful as this carry itself, she insisted. It ought to be made into a simple gown . . . a tea gown . . . Princess shape . . . let its line and colour be its chief ap-

peal . . . with touches of blue to bring out the ardour of the flame.

"Blew?" gasped Claudine.

"Forget-me-not blue . . . trimming of forget-me-nots . . . appliqué . . . from the hem and rising in—in sort of triangles all round. A forget-me-not blue bow at the back if you like. . . ."

The dress, exquisite, glowing, had taken shape before Sookey's vision. She saw it whole and perfect, the simple bold colours, the delicate blue throwing up the flame, the flame giving purity and eloquence to the blue. Claudine listened fearful, but all ears. Such simplicity outraged a mind that considered the height of taste was not reached until insertions, panels, net veiling, ribbons and point lace had been stuck on at every point where such an excrescence could be stuck. Stark simplicity—line and flame and blue making a shining, sweeping unity seemed to her to be crude, unlavish, almost nudity. Yet she missed not a detail.

They talked and talked about the dress, Claudine trying to make the servant elaborate the thing. Sookey downright and scornful about elaboration. Sookey glowing, Claudine hostile—but not daring to be hostile.

She had learnt by experience that Sookey was nearly always right—the mere slut of a general servant always right! It seemed to her an impiety that this low "creeture" should have a gift greater than her own, but hard fact had proved it so.

Nearly all Sookey's suggestions had been received with pleasure by Claudine's "peeple"! These little hints she had picked up from Sookey—only they were not little—had not only saved Claudine from dismissal, but were building up her reputation inside her firm and outside. She was gaining a name for originality, crispness, dash, individuality. To alter Sookey's designs was to risk losing that reputation. She had tried it once. She had elaborated one of Sookey's schemes

for a basque costume. She had muffled and fogged the chord of tones Sookey had thought out with ribbons and silk muslin and bretelles of amber velvet. . . . And her people had said: "Oh, Moseth, it lookth like a sea-thick tithy-cake. 'Ad a bad night, Miss Atherell? Thath not upth to your usual. . . . You gone back to your old stylth. Try again."

And, the mortification of it, Claudine had tried again. She stripped off her lovely ornamentations, she gave the design blankly—as Sookey had outlined it. And her people—or rather, the member of the tribe of Levi who managed for them—not merely beamed until she thought his pop eyes would pop a little farther and come entirely out, but his fat fingers pinched her bony arm, as he said, in a tone of honey: "One of these dayth we'll try a little tripth together, hey, Mith Claudine? Brighton, hey? . . . You got the makings of a good girl."

She and Sookey talked over that flame-coloured dress so earnestly and so late, then, that Mr. Meggie, who was in early for a wonder, came out on to the stairway from his room beneath them, and asked so loudly how they expected anyone to sleep through their mothers' meeting, that Mrs. Stoach came up from the basement to demand why Sookey was not in bed.

Sookey, glowing with the wonder of the flame-coloured dress, went to bed thinking it was a shame that this loveliness she had conceived could never see the light of day, because this idiot Claudine . . .

That idiot Claudine sat down before a pad of writing-paper, and sketched out the design before going to bed so that she should not allow her refined dreams to blur with elaborations her memory of it.

CHAPTER XVI

THE interest shown her by Claudine meant trouble for Sookey.

This was not the first time Mr. Meggie's intervention had opened Mrs. Stoach's eyes to the fact that her servant was gossiping and gadding instead of obtaining that sleep necessary to the ardour of her work. And not for the first time did she mutter:

"Er worderwarning in yer ear, me lidy. If I 'ears eny more o' this a-disturbin' o' the 'ouse at *eny* time it'll be back-door trot fer you sharp. You listenin'?"

Meggie was behind that. Meggie was the real stiffening of that moral-jelly labelled Mrs. Stoach. Meggie was jealous of Sookey's friendship with Claudine. There was a strange feminine pettiness about his attitude. He was not only enraged that he had lost the attention of this unusual and queerly pretty servant, but furious that someone else had gained it.

From the first Meggie had pressed his attack with a dark, flat plan of his own. He made it a commonplace that Sookey would succumb to him in time. He acted on that assumption. He talked to her with the bold frankness of a man with his mistress. He tried to catch her hand and stroke it as she put the tea on his table beside his bed. He commented upon the rounding and ripening of her swift, strong figure, as though the subject were already common property.

Sookey's upbringing amidst conversation more frank even than his enabled her to remain cool and unflustered. Possibly her calmness irritated. There were moments when he tried to force her hand.

"It's about time you gave me my good-morning kiss, like the three girls before you," he said one morning.

"All blind 'uns, I take it," said Sookey, evading his hand and going to the window.

"Couldn't you think of a smarter answer?" he jeered. "You citizens of the gutter are supposed to have a reputation for retort."

"Some people don't call fer the effort," she said.

Most days he had something to say about her looks, having found, no doubt, that that sort of thing inflamed vanity and destroyed resistance.

"You're a striking little beauty, Sookey," he would say, as though with reluctant admiration. "It amazes me where you get it from. That cheeky, cool, dashing little face of yours, and your colour."

"I gotter looking-glass," she said. "I know all about it."

"You know you're lovely?"

"Pertikerlarly when I look at you."

"Ah, but a face and a figure like that with the proper hats and smart clothes. . . ."

"Can't any of you think of a smarter line of patter?" she said scornfully. "Do your sort learn it all be 'eart out o' a book? I'll tell yer the rest to save your breath—lovely clothes, jewels, swagger resterunts, a gay time. Crr! you make me sleepy with yer glad talk."

"Character, too—but that's in your eyes, in your lips, in your very walk, by jingo. I'll bet a quid that one of your parents at least didn't come from the gutter."

Sookey let the blind snap up so that a blaze of sunshine struck into the man's aching eyes, and she walked indifferent out of the room despite his storm of oaths.

Nevertheless she felt that strange black power in him, and there were moments when she was almost ready to leave her place. A complexity of reasons held her. Her reluctance to make a change, the fact that Bert was away at that time in the North of England, the fascination of Meggie's tubes

of dye, the necessity of getting a long reference, the interest she was feeling in the technics of dressmaking that Claudine was beginning to reveal—and, above all, her sense of pride. It galled her pride to think that she should have to bolt from such a crab as Meggie.

She nearly did bolt, however, after the morning that he almost "got her."

When she entered his room that day he was apparently asleep, but no sooner had she put his cup down than his hand shot out and he had her wrist. A curious suffocation of panic took resistance from her, and she was down on his horrible flat chest before her nerve came to her help.

His dry, rasping lips were burning on her neck, and his spider arms clinging round her body held her with the tenacity of an ape's. The touch of his abominable lips steadied her. She heard her mind saying: "Look art, Young Sook, or 'e'll do it on yer!" She went passive.

No doubt he thought this was surrender. She expected he would. He shifted his arms to turn her, to get at her lips. Her right arm came down like a hammer on his mouth.

She was up, out of his clasp, though he held her left wrist tight. They strained panting for a minute, she with her knees braced against the bed, striving to wrench her arm away. She was as cool as ice now.

He said, grinning up at her:

"Stop playing the goat, my dear. I've got you for keeps this time. You know it's got to happen; why be a silly little fool about it?"

"Want me ter yell the house down?" she asked, as calm as he.

"That won't do you much good *here*," he jeered significantly.

She realized it would not. For some reason or reasons Mrs. Stoach was under his thumb.

"Come on, be a little sport," he cried. "I'm mad about you, you little love of a thing. I'll be awfully nice to you. Come on. . . ."

Sookey braced herself afresh and lifted his tea cup in her free hand.

"Going to lemme go?" she asked quietly.

"Not I. You're too pretty, an I've made up my mind you're going to belong to me. Come on now, it's only dam' pretence. . . ."

He strained on her arm. Sookey swung hers. The hot tea from a full cup took him in the face, and while he was gasping Sookey slipped out of the room. She left him to pull up his blind and to make what explanations he liked about the tea-stained bed-clothes. It didn't even worry her that he told Mrs. Stoach that she had clumsily upset the tea over him and left him to tell. Mrs. Stoach's anger and her fine to cover the washing was Meggie's method of showing her the power a paying lodger had over a paid lodging-house servant.

Sookey nearly left then. She did, even, on her night out, go to a new registry office. Claudine, however, dissuaded her. Claudine had already had the first of her triumphs from Sookey's dress designs, and Claudine used all the persuasion at her command to make Sookey stop on.

And the friendship of Claudine helped. It made Meggie sullen and distant. At first he tried to break the companionship by jibes at Claudine.

"Great heavens!" he would snarl. "Why are you talking like that penny-plain duchess? 'Ay will anquaire eff Mrs. Stoach hes some fresh sooap!' Gaw! . . . Don't you know that's slop? Don't you know the difference between the English language and bilge?"

"I don't even know what that is," she answered. "An' I don't suppose I'll mind when I do."

"Look it up in a dictionary," he snarled. "And if you must play the parrot, listen to me."

She was sorry she couldn't listen more to Mr. Meggie, because she was beginning to appreciate the fact that his diction, while less ornate and syrupy than Claudine's, had a decision and a distinction that was impressive. Mr. Meggie, the son of a rich dyer since bankrupt, had, indeed, been to a celebrated public school. Meggie grew to hate Claudine.

"What the devil do you see in that timid would-be wanton?" he demanded. "Are you so hard up for friends that she's the best you can find?"

"Well, you know the choice there is in this house," she said.

"She'll do you no good."

"*You* will, I suppose?"

"I suppose she's trying to steal your 'bloke' from you, hey?"

"Bloke's out of fashion," she answered calmly. "We call 'em 'chaps' now when we have 'em. I haven't one."

"Has she got the boxer fellow away from you, then? I've heard her rave about him enough."

Sookey was not stung as he expected her to be stung. She said:

"Oh, him—he's only a fren' I call in to deal with dirty dogs who get above themselves." She grinned in his face as she saw him wince. "You *may* meet him one o' these days."

It did her good to see him curl up, yet his venomous mind demanded the last word.

"If it isn't a 'chap' it's something. Our languid Alice doesn't suck up to little kitchen sluts for nothing, take it from me. She's worming something out of you."

"Perhaps it's the way to win your heart," grinned Sookey.

In time he had an air of having washed his hands of her.

He rather obviously ignored her. This gave him great power in making complaints.

He made them continuously, and nothing was too trivial, from the lack of attention she gave to his dusting to the din she and Claudine made above his head. Mrs. Stoach's cat-on-hot-bricks manner and her washy frown deepened. Her nagging and bullying of Sookey increased. She was, as Meggie well knew, between the devil and the deep sea. Meggie was the devil. The deep sea was the difficulty of obtaining any sort of maid at her wages to slave in such a house. Meggie knew that only extreme pressure would cause her to dismiss Sookey. He could keep up this form of torment indefinitely. His sleek look at Sookey during a "row" showed it. That look said, "How much better off you'd be if you'd only be sensible and do as I want."

On the night of the designing of the flame-coloured frock he went too far, however. Claudine and Sookey had talked too long, no doubt, and extra dissipation had made Meggie vicious. His comments to the flustered Mrs. Stoach brought Sookey a week's notice.

Meggie was sorry about that, and almost grateful to Claudine when she saved the situation.

Claudine, who had been glowing with elation during the week, blanched when Sookey said she had got the sack. She stared slack-mouthed; she was almost afraid for half a minute. Then she became the duchess of her latest novelette. She said loftily:

"Is that so? Well, ahy shall have a word to say to Mrs. Stoach on that subjec'."

She sailed in her most "willerwy" manner in upon Mrs. Stoach and struck that lady helpless with amazement by paying not only her full board and lodging, but also every cent of the debt she owed. She went further. She reduced Mrs. Stoach to gasping weakness by declaring that she

had been raised two whole pounds a week in her salary.

She had, she said, wearied of being the brains of her firm without adequate reward. She had at length struck. She had told them flat that they must recognize her worth in net cash, or she would walk straight out of the place and straight to a trade rival.

Mrs. Stoach, previous to this extraordinary interview, would have said that no greater happiness could have happened to Claudine's firm, but now she learnt that she had failed to gauge the mysterious follies of the West End. Instead of hurrying to the door to make Claudine's exit as smooth and as swift as possible there had been a panic.

A panic. Mrs. Stoach couldn't believe it of human nature —only the gold in her hand was proof positive. Claudine's "peeple," it seemed, had practically gone down on their knees to beg her to stay. They had more than implored her. They had put a bonus of five pounds into her hand, and made her this promise of the two extra a week as long as she would deign to honour their establishment with her haughty presence.

"They know the sort of work I've been doing lately," said Claudine darkly. "They know what they stand to lose."

Mrs. Stoach blinked before all these marvels, and wondered what bearing they had on her.

She soon knew. Claudine told her how sorry she was she could not take Mrs. Stoach's extra room, the top room next to Sookey's that had hung so long on Mrs. Stoach's hands. She was also sorry that she could not even keep on her old room for which she had just paid so much good, if unexpected money.

"Now that my 'peeple' have given my talent a chance I shall have to do more work at home. That nacherally means an extra room. A workroom. I thought, nacherally, of the room you had to spare."

"The very thin'," gasped Mrs. Stoach. "A luvely room. Suit you excellent, to accommodate a frien' I'd be reasonable, too."

"As to that, I *didn't* doubt, seein' you can't get anyone to take it for love or money. But, unfourchunately, in the circumstances——"

"Wot circumstances?" demanded the palpitating Mrs. Stoach.

"Well, you've dismissed Sookey, and I can't help feeling responsible, my nature being that fair. It was my talking to her that did it, so in the circumstances I can scarcely stay on when you send away that poor girl because of me."

"It—it wasn't only the talking, Miss Atherell."

"I should always feel that I had done that poor little thing an injury—if she went. I feel it strongly. A pity, because that room would be admirrible."

"I'm willin' to let 'er 'ave another chance if she behaves herself," said Mrs. Stoach, breathing powerfully.

"Even then, whenever I had a chat with Sookey I'd feel I was doing her harm. Even up in that room out of hearing. It is a pity. I was so keen on that room I'd have paid your own price."

Mrs. Stoach choked a little. Then:

"Come upstairs an' 'ave a look at it . . . eny'ow, wot 'arm is there in two girls 'aving a bit o' gossip. Only 'uman nachur."

Mrs. Stoach gave a small suppressed gasp as she passed Mr. Meggie's room, but her terror was groundless. When the news that Mrs. Stoach had rescinded her week's notice percolated through to Mr. Meggie, as it did in some mysterious way, he was actually relieved. He wanted Sookey to remain and succumb in time. He did not like being beaten either.

As for Claudine, she knew she was a heroine. She had saved Sookey by an act of extreme devotion, and at the crush-

ing cost of 7s. 6d. a week. She did not allow her generosity to blush unseen, and she was hurt by the calm with which Sookey took it.

Really the girl was vulgarly ungrateful, and she would have told her so tartly, had she not realized that such telling might lose her her two pounds raise—and more.

For the raise came from Sookey's flame-coloured dress. It had caused a sensation. It had startled Claudine's people to admiration. It had been exhibited in her people's shop window with much of the solemnity given to an exhibition of Crown Jewels, and the crowd that collected daily to adore it, that came into the shop hourly in the hope of finding other specimens of the same quality, not merely meant profit to the shop but the triumph of Claudine.

She had promptly made use of that triumph to force a raise in salary, and she meant to hold on to that raise and go higher and higher—even though it cost her 7s. 6d. a week and a display of crude ingratitude from Sookey.

She was not the only one troubled by Sookey's manner. Mrs. Stoach had been put out by the girl's off-hand "I'll see. I'll tell you pay day," when she had intimated that Sookey could stay on. Her qualms were not lessened when a neighbour told her that she had seen Sookey going into the new registry office.

And she was right to be anxious.

On Wednesday, which was Sookey's pay day, Claudine's people put some rolls of beautiful new dress fabrics before her, and told her to "get busyth on it," because the shop could not live forever on one flame-coloured frock.

With samples of these materials Claudine hurried home dreaming of brilliant talks with Sookey.

In the breakfast parlour of the house she found Mrs. Stoach in a state of flop—the lady's own expression.

Sookey had taken her week's money, gone to the window

and waved her hand. The prize-fighter feller, Bert, had immediately come to the house. Between them they had carried Sookey's box down from the attic and out of the house without even a thought for the stricken Mrs. Stoach. Not all Mrs. Stoach's tears could move Sookey. She had accepted Mrs. Stoach's notice and she had got another place, and to that place she had resolutely gone.

"Where?" asked Claudine in a strangled voice.

"I was so overcome I 'adn't the 'art ter arsk," moaned Mrs. Stoach. "'Ow am I goin' ter run a 'ouse like this single-'anded, you takin' the extry room and all."

"Keep yer damned 'xtra room, yer damned ole baggage!" snarled Claudine, reverting to nature. "I got no use fer it any more, nor fer you . . . I'm outter this in a week, d'y 'ear?"

It was no satisfaction to her to hear Meggie's voice rising with such a sense of furious intimacy from Mrs. Stoach's room throughout the night as to explain how he had his power over the woman.

Meggie was furious at the loss of Sookey too, Claudine was glad to hear—only that would not help her to make those designs her "peeple" wanted so badly.

CHAPTER XVII

Sookey had interviewed an extraordinarily attractive young lady in the new registry office.

Bert Tavener, in London for a spell after fulfilling boxing engagements in the north, had advised a move. Although Bert had not heard all there was to hear about Mr. Meggie, he had heard enough to offer the considered opinion that one of these days Mr. Meggie would qualify for a bashing. And since he (Bert) might not be on the spot to supply it, it would be a tragedy.

Bert was not going to be here for long. Bert was on the climb in earnest now. In Glasgow he had fought and whacked a man with a name like a teetotal drink, and that victory had earned him his first definite position in the Hall of Fame. He was going as far away as Canada as one of a string of young fighters and so could not be at hand for the giving of the bashing.

Also he said the Young Sookey had so much class about her now that she was wasted on a lodging-house. Also Old Sookey, who had remained calm under the desertion of her daughter, was beginning to show an unhealthy curiosity about Bert's doings also.

She had stopped Bert as he passed her door one day and she had asked questions that had made Bert—even Bert—uneasy. She had not apparently said much, that frightful old woman never had to say much: "But I'd rather give away a stone an' stand up to a battler than have many more of those little chats," Bert said.

It was Bert's opinion that Old Sookey had heard rumours of Young Sookey. Someone had seen her in the Old Kent

Road, or, worse, seen Bert and her. On that count as well as others Sookey had better shift. One never knew when an old dear like Old Sookey would swoop.

The attractive young lady had come into the registry office while Sookey was waiting with five others. She was very fair and very dainty, but in a jolly sort of way. She had a face of strange loveliness, a serious, Madonna beauty that was lit with good humour and high spirits.

As she was talking to the woman at the counter her eyes strayed over the waiting women, fixed on Sookey, laughed at Sookey, and even as the woman at the counter was speaking, she made a step towards Sookey. "Inside here, please, Muddam," said the woman severely, and extinguished the vivid young lady in the Reception Room.

But she could not be extinguished. The first aspirant went in, and came out quickly. The second more quickly—with a toss of head and a sniff. Sookey almost giggled when she heard a bright, slow voice saying: "It's no good. . . . I want the young one." With an awful dignity the woman of the registry office came out and beckoned Sookey.

"When can you come in?" the girl asked before Sookey could sit down, and when Sookey laughed she laughed too.

"I ought to begin at the beginning, oughtn't I? Do it for me. Tell me what you expect—wages, and all that sort of thing . . . and then we'll be sensible."

Sookey told her all she wanted, and the girl said, "Yes," as though there was a joke in it after everything. And then the girl said again: "When can you come in?"

"You haven't asked me about a reference," said Sookey, feeling that somehow she must defend this buoyant creature against herself.

"And you haven't asked what sort of house ours is," said the girl. "I'm funking that. It's a swarming sort of house, there are eight of us, and it's a big place, and we're

rather untidy and clutterish. I oughtn't to start at that end, I know, but there it is, I always do. There are four girls, and we all help, cooking and dusting and turning out almost anything. . . . But you may hate that too."

Sookey looked at the girl, who suffered from this unheard-of but quite pleasant affliction of candour, and thought she wouldn't hate it very much.

"My father's a doctor. That means a certain amount of door work—not much. We have the sort of patient that walks straight in to the waiting-room. But they leave mud." There was dismay in the eyes of the girl as she remembered the mud.

Sookey said that mud had no terrors for her. The girl went on. "You lay the table, but not wait at it. We reach for things. And we really do help a lot ourselves. But there are eight of us, and it's a big house.

"I'm in a lodging-house now," said Sookey, again finding she had to take the side of the girl. She was, actually, the most natural, genuine thing Sookey had ever met. And her beauty was the most poignant thing Sookey had seen. "Lodging-houses make other houses seem easy, miss," she finished. "I can come in on Wednesday next. Where is your house?"

"What luck!" said the girl. "But directly I saw you I knew you were an answer."

"Answer—how, miss?"

"I said a novena for you," said the girl. And then she laughed at Sookey's bewilderment. "I said prayers for you."

Sookey thought her quite mad, but very charming. And that bit about prayer was so like Bert that she was not surprised to find that the girl's name was O'Gara, which she guessed was Irish. But she had to say again: "Where is your house, miss?"

"I'm afraid it's a long way from here," said the girl

seriously. "I came to this place accidentally—sheer luck—because I was visiting close. But it's a long way away."

"You're funking that too, miss," said Sookey, beginning to funk herself. If that long way away meant in the direction of Goose Common she could not take the post. Curious how painful the idea of not living with this girl seemed.

"Rotherhithe," said Mary O'Gara, and looked anxious.

Sookey smiled. Rotherhithe was farther from Goose Common than the Old Kent Road. Rotherhithe was also the fabled land that rimmed the view from her attic, the land where the romantic spars of great ships fretted her sky. Rotherhithe was all she wanted.

She and Bert took her box to Rotherhithe that fateful Wednesday.

But before she "went in" they had a jaunt.

They left the box at the house, and under Mary O'Gara's smile went off to spend the evening in the West End. That had been in the compact. Sookey was to give the evening to "my cousin Bert who's off to Canada" in a week's time.

They bussed through the various smells, jam and ships, cocoa and tannery pit that make Dockhead and Tooley Street. They crossed London Bridge looking for the white horse one always sees on it. They shot the maelstrom that is the Bank crossing and so along Cheapside and Holborn to the uttermost ends of the earth.

To Bert this "beano" was to be eating swell and walking adventurously through the mysterious fastnesses of the "nobs."

To Sookey it was shops.

She got down long before Oxford Circus was reached just to look at shops. She passed slowly before shops with steady, all-absorbing, all-analysing glances. Bargains did not interest her, it was cut and colour and design, the lines of frocks, the

shades of style, the massing and the grouping, the taste or lack of it, the effectiveness or failure of window dressing.

Each shop was a box of jewels to her, to be examined in detail and mass. A less calm person than Bert would have been maddened by her, a less patient would have been furious when, after having her fill of shops as far as Bond Street, she demanded instead of eating, more shops.

"Down here, along Piccadilly, up Regent Street, 'fore they close, Bert."

"You're a fair glutton fer cheap sights," said Bert, calm, off-hand as ever. "Wouldn't you like somethin' to eat an' then finish up at the Holborn Empire?"

"I don't want to eat. I want to look," said Sookey, looking.

"Go ahead," grinned Bert. "Buy the whole world—in your mind. But I don't mind footing up for a blouse or something, Sook. Like to, and I'm flush."

"I don't want to buy anything," she said. "Only look."

She looked until even Bert grew bored. Before Liberty's he had to ask her if she had taken root. She felt she had. All those ravishing, Eastern, bold, lovely colours held her spellbound. Aladdin's cave was a mere raree show beside those glowing, jewel-fired windows. Never had she seen so much pure colour spun into sheer poetry. Never had she seen the things she yet vaguely felt rendered and transfused by art into symphonic beauty.

Only with a sigh did she turn away as the human Niagara of girls that denotes closing time spouted and heaved, eddied and poured about her.

"Had enough?" asked Bert.

"No," she said, "but I'm ready to go."

"Like all that sort o' thing?" he asked as he pushed through quiet streets towards Soho.

"Like it? It's me," she said.

"Come off your perch, Sook," he grinned.

"It is me . . . all them shops. There's where I want to be some day. Making things. . . . Colours an' all that. I could show a few of them shops a thing or two even nar, I lay." Intensity of feeling was carrying her tongue back to Cherry Pie Gardens. "Some of the shops, some of the things in the shops— Lummy, they weren't worth burning. . . . I'll show 'em a thing or two one day, you see."

"Nothing like a fat head," he said calmly.

"I'll show *you*," she snapped at him.

"You *won't*," he said cheerfully cool. "I'm going right to the top. I'll pull the dibs in with both hands when my turn comes. I'll be away high up."

"And I'll be on top of you," she jerked at him. "I know, I belong 'ere. I feel it."

He looked at her grinning, but somehow he thought she looked it too. A tall, crisp kid, dressing, he had thought, a little too dowdy for taste, but here she somehow looked right.

Her eyes were luminous and brighter than ever with excitement. There was a sparkle in her very cheeks, there was a fine, quick scorn in her strangely mobile lips. . . . There wasn't one girl in two hundred who had her curious aloofness in beauty. Not one in five hundred who had her strange distinction in poise. Even her dress, he saw now, was right. In that welter of bright dresses, in that great basket of sharp, quick, flashing millinery blooms, her dress stood out. It made cheap the flashy ones, it held its own with the distinctive ones. Bert led her to a restaurant feeling at once an up-to-date dog and slightly abashed.

Bert had got the habit of entering daringly into what he considered swagger eating places, and he took Sookey into what he felt was a veritable zoo of the aristocracy now. He was a little scared at his temerity, but showed it only faintly. Sookey was utterly scared, and showed it not at all.

It was not so exalted a place as Bert thought, but it was one of those little gem-bright places in Soho that become the fashion of a season. One of Bert's backers, a man of birth and money, had taken him to this place.

They were early, so they had time to reconnoitre the numberless knives and forks, the several glasses, the menu and the attentions of several breeds of waiter. One waiter was very helpful. He followed boxing, and he remembered Bert and his backer. He knew from what rank prize-fighters sprang and he had no compunction whatever in giving them tips as to which weapons were to be used to attack which foods. He did it so skilfully and tactfully that they felt like habitués of the Savoy towards the end of their meal.

The meal was wonderful enough, all those strange little bits of abnormal flavours that go to make up a Soho *table d'hôte*. Sookey felt as though she were dining off a book of fairy tales. The people, however, were more wonderful.

Evening frocks and white shirts flowed in marvellously. Nude white shoulders, slowly moving arms, bare sometimes as far as the biceps, the tremblings of plumes in *coiffures* as perfect in their sleekness as things cast in metal—gold metal, bronze metal, and metal glossy with black lacquer, the glint of jewels, and the clink of sparkling bangles, the grace of posture, the silhouettes of perfect shoes and paste buckles, the coy hints of ankles slender and silken showing under the mystical flash of lace petticoats, the sight of a daring woman smoking a real cigarette in public, the molassine waltz tunes of a Hungarian band that had come from as far east as Dalston—all this filled Sookey with terror, desire, glamour and understanding.

This was life. This was the plane for which Nature had destined her. This colour, opulence, lavishness, sleekness, this glitter of living, this cruel glory over dirt and squalor, came

nearer to satisfying her urgent and fastidious desires than anything in her experience.

They left early because Sookey had promised to be in Rotherhithe as soon after nine as possible. As they passed through the shrill arc-lit brilliance of theatreland the carriages and quite a number of motor-cars were setting down outside the theatres.

They paused by the Garrick and watched jewelled creatures in their nosegays of frocks being dropped on to the pavements. It was as though some vast and gentle hand shook them one by one from a great cornucopia. The pretty, silken things alighted delicately under the glare, shook and preened themselves so that the enamel-light beauty of their sheaths glowed and flashed in the light. Then they stepped daintily into the theatre, long skirts and opera capes bunched, stem-like ankles moving gracefully forward to the tapping of high French heels.

A ravishing sight, an uplifting sight, a provocative sight. Even Bert, the phlegmatic, said, as they moved away:

"One o' these days, Sook, I'm going to be on top of that crowd. I'll have the money to lord it with the best o' them."

"One of these days I shall be *in* that crowd," said Sookey fiercely. "People will watch *me* holdin' my silks an' showing my ankles. I shall go everywhere just like that, *one of them*."

"You got a hope," grinned Bert.

"I have. That's going ter be *me*. That's where I'm aiming. . . . To get inside."

"I dunno," said Bert soberly. "There's too much oof an' too much pride ter do one any good, I lay."

"That's why I'm for it," said Sookey. Suddenly she had seen her goal. All her vague desires had coalesced into a great desire for—that: to be one of that smart, jewelled, arrogant, dominant crowd, lording it over and contemptuous of commoner clay.

She felt that was her destiny and right. It was the difference between her and Cherry Pie Gardens. That was what had made her feel that the people of Cherry Pie, of Old Kent Road, were dirt. These were the nobler strain—her strain.

In that one evening her ambition had crystallized—money, power, a glittering arrogance in life, these were the things she would live for.

CHAPTER XVIII

Dr. O'Gara's house was in Rotherhithe Street.

It was a survival of the days when one great Diarist, a certain Mr. Pepys, used to stay across the Thames for amusements not unconnected with the Bear Pit, and another, John Evelyn, laboured more soberly in the neighbourhood of the street now bearing his name, at his beautiful garden containing among other things, that noble holly hedge through which Peter the Great loved to charge in a wheelbarrow.

It was a fine old house. If it was hedged on one side by a wharf and the other by a junk-yard, it hid dignity behind its sheer, stoic face. It had rambling rooms and wandering passages, and some of the rooms and some of the passages had oak panelling which Dr. O'Gara hoped was the work of John Evelyn's protégé, Grinling Gibbons.

No doubt the house had been built by some old shipping master, or by some naval officer connected with the Royal Yards at Deptford. But that it had had owners not quite so virtuous the O'Garas felt certain. By prising up a stone slab in the cellars a powerful smell and the sound of running water became apparent. Some stream hastened to join the Thames in the dark beneath the house, and that stream, the O'Garas argued, must have been a channel for contraband. Bede O'Gara went even further and pointed out the usefulness of such a private river for the disposal of inconvenient dead bodies.

The garden of the house ran right down to the river, and from a little gallery outside the drawing-room, which the O'Garas called "The Poop," one could look out on to the

shining water of the Lower Pool and The Pool, and take in the lyric passing of stately ships, the water-spider dart of small craft against the lowering mass of Wapping and Shadwell, with their webbing of lattice cranes and ships' spars and stacks, the humps of dock warehouses, and the constant fret and waft of steam and smoke.

The house would have been impossible for servants in other hands than the O'Garas'; it was too full of dimness, passages, dark corners and other heart-breaks for maids. The O'Garas, however, were not exacting, and they were helpful. They did not mind what they did, and if they were entirely unscientific and utterly disconcerting in their methods they were also astonishingly cheerful, willing, friendly and chaotically energetic.

Sookey never knew if it would be Cecilia, the eldest girl, or Mary, the second, who would cook the breakfast. Nor did the fact that one of them had fulfilled that function prevent Barbe or Lucila from taking on the dinner. There were even days—after a dance, for example—when it was as likely for Bede, John or Patrick to stroll into the kitchen and fry the bacon and eggs with dashing inexpertness.

All the girls, save Barbe, who had a sneaking passion for entrée dishes and cake-making, used to warn Sookey with the utmost cheerfulness never to aspire to a cook's job, because it scorched the complexion and was otherwise hateful. Then they would sing for hours in jolly high spirits as they prepared the large and elaborate meals necessary for such a household. The skill of all of them, even Lucila just from school, in the craft was extraordinary.

It was the same through all the piece. Washing up. . . . Mary or Barbe would appear in the kitchen and cry: "What a ghastly pile! All those plates just because man must eat." A fair head would shine against the darkness of the stairs, a soft voice with a little velvet brogue would cry: "Now you

lazy ones up there—Barbe, Cis, Pat. . . . Sookey is dying over the washing-up. Come along."

One of the girls, two of the girls would come down, a boy might lounge down, all would "bag into it" with dish-mops and drying cloths, and the heap of dirty pieces would vanish like magic.

House-cleaning. . . . A bolt from the blue, or rather one hurling straight from breakfast discussions, would be the first warning Sookey would have that the doctor's room, or Bede's room, or Mary and Lucila's room was to be "turned out" to-day. And the room was turned out with tornado effect. Two, three, four vigorous pairs of hands assaulted it with unappeasable dash; chairs, tables, ornaments were hurled into the passage, scrubbing brushes hissed, dusters flicked, and after an hour that room was dazed, reeling, but spotless.

At times it was like living with a family of good-tempered whirlwinds, but Sookey was never happier. The sweetness, the even temper, the genuine goodwill, the native wholesomeness of these happy-go-lucky people was infectious. Sookey might be faintly scornful at times of their superb insensibility to muddle, might know moments when she felt that the tenderness of affection that marked all relationships and excused all faults in this house was a little "soft," might consider their strong and ironic indifference to worldly advancement all wrong, yet the habitual atmosphere of the house was all that was right.

The spectacle of these vivid, well-bred girls, all of whom had beauty, facing all that must be faced in that drab neighbourhood with such steady good spirit was stimulating, and they asked no more of her than they demanded of themselves, and treated her humanly and charmingly into the bargain. She grew to be a kind of good-tempered whirlwind herself.

There was no doubt they were what Sookey had once called toffs. They had about them that air of undemonstrative dis-

tinction that Claudine had never had, that Meggie just missed, but which Paul Geneste and some of those distantly admired people of the West End undoubtedly had. It was a manner which filled Sookey with satisfaction and awe, a manner she absorbed like a thirsty sponge.

Her quick, perceptive, acquisitive mind absorbed something from all of them.

From the doctor, a tall, clothes-prop of a man with some of the frail, kinky angularity of a clothes-prop, she learnt something of the grand manner. It had come to him from his forbears, who owned big estates in Ireland, and it went admirably with his high-nosed, grizzled fierceness both of hair and ardour. He was brusque, brisk, thrusting. He snapped like a whip-lash. He bullied the patients who poured constantly through his consulting-room, but there was not a patient who did not swear by him, nor had he ever lost a friend or a love he had won.

Cecilia had the most worldly beauty, she had a fragility, a daintiness that was of porcelain. Every inflection of her exquisite small-featured face, every movement of that gossamer body was perfection. Her intonations were slow, soft and had a delicate music. Sookey knew what a great lady must be like when she studied Cecilia, and she studied her always. Cecilia's proper place was in a great drawing-room, with all the elect of the land admiring her and scores of servants to do her will. Yet Cecilia was a B.A. of London University. She had studied and brilliantly passed examinations in Dispensary Work, so that when she was not cooking or helping in the house she could make up and bottle medicine for her father. And to see Cecilia tuck her long skirts and with slim, swift limbs chase John or Patrick through the house and out to "The Poop" and—by a flying leap—down into the garden in a game of hide-and-seek was to realize how human a creature she was also.

Barbe, an occasional school-teacher, was a boon to Sookey. She had a brisk, jolly way of saying over one of her entrée dishes: "No Sookey, *not* 'them people.' You know that's not right. Now what ought you say?"

"Those people," Sookey would smile back.

"You say it like Mary, too," said the brisk Barbe. "You're an awful little parrot, Sookey, but you do play parrot to the right accent, and you are frightfully sharp. Keep on saying 'those people who called,' until it comes naturally to the tongue."

Barbe was useful; she was so firm and school-mistressy. Lucila was almost better; a lank, loose creature with the beautiful crude movements of a foal, she laughed at every one of Sookey's mistakes in a jolly way that underlined them without hurting. Lucila's sudden frank laugh and cry cropped more errors in Sookey than all the rest put together, especially when Barbe or Mary was by to give correction.

Mary she really loved. Mary was the quiet power behind the house. She was patient, laughing, serene, and of an extraordinary gentleness. That the household managed to go on at all was her doing, and she did it rather by influencing others than by commanding. She had a mind as lovely as her face, a little melancholy and mystical as became her race. She had an affection for the poetry of all the poets who died young—Chatterton, for instance—and for slow deep music which she played with accomplishment on a piano not always in the full bloom of its tune. She said brisk things in a lazy voice and with a great precision in enunciation. She used to say to Sookey:

"You have such a pretty mouth, Sookey, you ought to form words beautifully. If you would only feel that they were lovely things. . . ."

"And not say them through my nose, Miss Mary," Sookey smiled.

"You do, don't you? But less. You could speak beautifully, Sookey, if you tried."

Sookey was always trying. She wanted to speak as beautifully as Mary O'Gara, she wanted to have a manner that would carry her anywhere, and she wanted to please Mary, too. She knew that Mary was interested in her, that she was one of those people who were always looking for talent in unsuspected places and always trying to develop it. She did not quite take to Mary's lending her poetry books, for she had not much taste for reading, and less for poetry that harped so insistently on grave worms, but she was proud to know that the others talked of her as "Mary's Kitchen Genius," for she felt that Mary was discerning.

But it was Bede who really discovered her gifts.

Bede was an architect. He was the eldest child—a tall, slim, gilt creature, now rather vague and distant in manner, now a victim of the wildest and most reckless hilarity. He was different from his brothers: John, who was blunt and thick-set and jolly rather than good-looking and studying to be a doctor, and Patrick, who was short, yet not so thick as John, but even better looking than Bede, and who, being but a year longer out of school than Lucila, the youngest child, had still to make up his mind whether the Merchant Service or a bank would absorb his intelligence.

Bede because of his profession and his age was the only one except the Doctor to have a bedroom of his own. In that bedroom was a big trestle table holding a double-elephant drawing-board, T-squares, and other tools, and generally bearing the first sketch of a Cathedral. It was rarely more than a first sketch, for no sooner had Bede O'Gara drawn a portion of its austere elevation than he had to unpin it and replace it by a drawing of some drainage system which was his firm's specialty.

Sookey enjoyed that room because there were many archi-

tectural books in it of a type she could understand and like, books with more pictures than text, books with many glowing coloured plates.

Bede, in addition to a yearning towards cathedrals, had a taste for the pretties of his profession, the planning of gardens and garden houses, the restoration of old magnificences, the scheming of exhibitions and of private rooms. Very little of such work ever came his way, so he kept it from starving by constantly feeding it with beautiful plates in beautiful books. And Sookey felt as if those books had been specially bought to help her.

Perhaps they had. They were the cause of Bede's interest in her.

Three members of the clan O'Gara having gone for a week-end in the country, and four of them having planned a day down the river, Sookey was told to deal faithfully with the drawing-room while the chances were so auspicious. Bede was first home into the drawing-room. He entered with a vague slouch, stiffened, stared about.

Lucila bounced upon his heels. She gaped round. She cried: "I sa-ay, what ass has been fooling with that silk spread?"

She lunged forward. Bede made a long arm and caught her so surely and firmly by her neck that her young, loose legs seemed to shoot onward while the rest of her jerked still and remained suspended from the hand.

"Whoa, you young Philistine," said Bede. "Keep your unsanctified paws off that. Who did it?"

"Sookey, of course," said Mary, who had come in.

"*Our* Sookey?" said Bede.

"Who else's, and why not?" asked Mary.

"But you can see for yourself—that's dam' good."

They could all see for themselves. A corner of the room had been rearranged. The silk spread, a Chinese strip of

plangent blue, was masking the rather worn settee, a screen, sulphur yellow, once pushed into a corner of the Mary-Lucila bedroom, backed the settee, a black-bronze Chinese figure on a black stem pedestal which had once held a pot of flowers was in the grouping, a bull's-eye mirror held the lucid colours of the room diminished and foreshortened like some strange Asiatic jewel. The whole of that corner—colour and form—was bizarre, arresting, beautiful.

"It's remarkable," said Bede.

"It's jolly," said Lucila, without the slightest prejudice against the ass who had fooled with the silk spread.

"We've been in this house donkey's years," said Bede, "with all these things about us. Yet it takes a slip of a serving maid who's been here a few months only to show us how to get real value out of them. You know that's rather remarkable, Mary."

"Sookey's rather remarkable," smiled Mary.

"Our Kitchen Genius," giggled Lucila.

"You're talking like a pup," said Bede to her; "all the same, out of the mouths of pups and infants. . . . I say, can we have her up?"

"Where did you get that idea from, Sookey?" asked Bede, when Sookey came up.

Sookey had looked at their faces; she knew there was no hostility there. "Partly from your books, Mr. Bede," she said.

She could see him running over all his books in his mind: "There's nothing like that, quite like it, in my books," he said, "is there?"

"No," she admitted. "But the general sort of idea, I mean."

"I see," said Bede, and she saw he did. "But the colour scheme. It's bold and unusual—and right. But there's nothing like it in my books."

"Oh, I'm fond of colours," smiled Sookey. "I like arranging them."

"I can see you do, by jove," said Bede. "Had any training? I mean been to any classes for that sort of thing? No? . . . Look here, you can take any books you'd like to study out of my room *when* you like, Sookey. And whenever you want to know anything, on the constructional side—how rooms are built and that sort of thing, you know—you come and ask me. Any time you like, you know."

He meant it and proved he meant it. He said to Mary: "I believe you've hooked the real fish this time, Mary." He stared at Sookey's arrangement of the corner. "Gosh! that's something more than imitation; that's a flash of real talent. There's something in that kid."

It was characteristic of this family that, having found something even in a servant, they did all in their power to bring it out. The girls encouraged it; Bede fostered it. He talked construction to Sookey, the fundamentals of grouping and arranging rooms, the effect of light and refraction of light, the art of making small rooms seem large and low ones tall by interior effects, of relieving dark corners, of placing doors, fireplaces and windows—all the tricks of his craft, in fact.

In the course of these occasional instructions over a period of months he taught her to read plans and elevations, to draw rooms even at his big board, to scale and compute, to work up a sketch accurately from figures and notes, to draw and to apply washes of paints so that she could judge the colour effects from pigments, to experiment continually in designing rooms. He even, since she wanted it, taught her, by a system of squares and straight lines, to draw the human figure so that she could put her designs for dresses on paper. . . . She designed for all the girls dresses that were so attractive that

they declared they ruined themselves going to parties to show them off.

Bede O'Gara was quite the most valuable influence she could have had at this period, for he gave her budding impulses a sure and practical foundation of real craftsmanship upon which to build.

And in another way he had a profound influence too. He did all he did in the most natural and unembarrassed way. There was no familiarity and no loss of dignity—on either side. And he did not make love to her. Not one of the males in the house made love to her, though they were perfectly aware that she was extremely good-looking and attractive.

She began to realize that this love-making and hunger for woman did not make up the whole of a man's life. She began to feel that love-making, the sort that had harried her, was not done by reputable people like this. As she meant to be reputable, her already considerable distaste for that sort of thing became decisive. It was a curious way for morality to be thrust upon her.

All the same, though the O'Garas did not make love to Sookey, or in the way Sookey had known, they did not avoid love. They considered it quite a lot in constant jolly flirtations. Plenty of charming young people of both sexes drifted into the house, and the O'Garas were not at all embittered misanthropes.

One of the young people who drifted to the house was Paul Geneste.

CHAPTER XIX

Paul Geneste came on Sunday afternoon, the one solemn date for callers, the one day when Sookey could be certain that she had a white apron *and* cap on, the one day when she, and not one of the girls or one of the boys or nobody at all, attended the ring of the front-door bell.

She opened the door to his ring, and enjoyed the film of surprise and faint consternation that supplanted the air of polite inquiry on his rough-hewn face.

Sookey did not turn a muscle or blush a tinge.

She happened to be ready for him:

John O'Gara had said at breakfast: "Oh, before I forget it, I've asked a fellow named Geneste to call this afternoon."

"We're all going to Greenwich, then," Cecilia said promptly. "I will *not* be stammered to death by another of your great intellects."

John had the habit of bringing Great Minds to the house. He collected them one by one from among his fellow-students at hospital, and invited them determinedly for two, three, or even more weeks. Then he dropped them, and went on to the next Vast Intelligence.

His fickleness was not entirely due to himself. He brought these men home because they showed marked brilliance in some branch of the doctor's craft, and he was hungrily keen for knowledge. Having got them to the house he usually did spend a solid hour or so ecstatically discussing surgery, optics, the diseases of the aorta, or whatever subject his victim specialized in.

The length of these untrammelled discussions depended

upon the length of time the specialist arrived before tea.

At tea at least one sister appeared, or two, or, more often, all four. From that moment surgery, optics and the diseases of the aorta ceased to be subjects of cosmic importance. John might do his strenuous best, but not even so hard a worker in monologue could hold an attention doomed to stray continuously to where Cecilia's porcelain fairness or Mary's Madonna gentleness held court amid the Great Intellects of the last three months.

Twice, thrice even, John would strive against Fate, but at the third or fourth Sunday he was usually the one most startled when they turned up.

The girls were not startled. They knew the ways of Great Minds. They made room on the settee beside them, or made sure that there would not be room, as the nature of the Vast Intelligences decided.

This Sunday John was still certain that he had found the unique Great Mind. Paul Geneste was different: "He won't stammer you to death, Cis; what is more, you won't even stand a chance of stammer. No use for your sex, you know, he's all for research."

Paul Geneste in research was apparently as outstanding as he was expected to be as a male. His development along these lines was already beginning to fill John's hospital with enthusiasm and hero-worship. Paul Geneste was expected, as Sookey learnt on her passage to and fro with breakfast things, to be one of the greatest figures in scientific medical research of his day.

"I think he will be," said John. "He's a fellow of terrific drive and force. One of these hard-hewn chaps who only have to make up their minds about their future to make their future."

Mary gave a little wail. She cried with mock-misery: "Another cave-man from the North! All Doric accent,

compliments like loaded clubs and the grim story of his struggle onward and upward. Why *does* every man from the North have a grim struggle upward?"

She had reason for anxiety. Her gentleness seemed to draw cave-men. It was always on her that they tried their prehistoric charm.

"Not this chap," said John. "He comes from near here, Goose Common. His father is a G.P. there. He is quite a decent fellow, good breeding and manners."

"But an iron loathing for all women," said Barbe.

"Lord, no," grinned John, paying back for the loss of many Great Minds. "He doesn't notice you enough for that. Why should he?"

"I'll put on Sookey's dress," smiled Cecilia, "and we shall see."

For the first time in her experience Sookey felt she did not quite like Cecilia.

Paul Geneste was the same, astonishingly the same, for Sookey judged change by the immense change that had gone on in her. He was a little more rugged and thoughtful, and he seemed to have a greater force, but that was all the difference. He recovered aplomb at once. He said to her:

"It *is* Sookey Roberts, isn't it?"

"Sookey Lee now, sir, said Sookey.

He nodded, understanding, came in, hung up his hat. He was matter-of-fact, not in the least conspiratorial, though there was the secret of Herbert Young's death between them. He said:

"I'm calling on Mr. John O'Gara. . . . Getting on well, Sookey?"

"Very well, sir," she said, wondering whether he saw the change in her—intonation, manner, looks. He did.

"I can see you are," he smiled. "You've blossomed out, Sookey."

His gaze was quiet, but it thrilled; she knew he was admiring her. She led him up the rambling stairs to the room that John shared with Patrick.

"How is your friend, the fighting man—Bert Something?" asked Paul, as they travelled upward.

"He's doing extraordinarily well, sir," she answered, so that he would have the full benefit of her improved diction. "He is touring in Canada now. He expects to be champion of his weight one of these days."

"I expect he will be; he's a fine fellow," said Paul calmly, genuinely. "And yourself, Sookey, no troubles—your mother?"

"I have heard very little of her from the day I left her, and that's nearly two years now."

"Two years, I suppose it is as long as that," said Paul, as though it didn't concern him very much. "Any trouble from any other quarter?"

She knew he was thinking of Alf Naylor.

"No, sir. I can look after myself."

"Better than ever now," he laughed, and though she knew that his compliment was a convention, she saw that his eyes paid her a tribute again. "You won't want Goose Common mentioned here, I suppose?"

"Oh, no, sir. I came here from the Old Kent Road."

That was the limit of their conversation, and if Sookey expected something dramatic to follow she was disappointed.

Perhaps, faintly, she did expect something. She expected him, perhaps, to refer to her if only for her looks and charming manner—at eighteen her looks and her manner seemed to be of great importance and hardly to be overlooked. She expected, perhaps, the O'Garas to speak of her to him as being no ordinary girl, so giving him a chance of adding a discreet tribute to her.

She knew it would have to be discreet, and his remark

about Goose Common showed he realized it, but she could not help being piqued that his discretion should take the form of absolute silence.

She felt this more because for once John had been right. Paul Geneste was not his usual Great Mind, he was not greatly interested in women. To have had his interest, if only secretly, would have been a small triumph over the others that the feminine in her could not resist.

She watched him with the O'Gara girls. They were immediately attracted by him, possibly because his exclusive attitude teased them. He was polite enough to them, but he was distant, even subtly superior in his manner. His success in research work plus his youth made him a little lofty and decided his opinion.

He could join in the hilarity of the tea-table, but less naturally than he joined in long, pontifical talks with John. The only female he showed any sort of partiality for was Lucila, who was a flapper and younger even than Sookey. He would sometimes forget his brilliance, and tease or romp with her in a vivid boyish abandon. He may have done this because he felt Lucila a child and not likely to endanger his career, or because, as Barbe said, Lucila was threatening to become a she-doctor, and there was a sinister affinity between them.

For week after week—sometimes missing a Sunday—Paul came and sat in John's room and smoked and talked endlessly, with what Cecilia declared to be a grisly and inhuman zest, about little wriggly things only fit to be seen through a microscope. And, strangely, this unnatural eagerness to dwell on such abhorrent things as trypanosomes when there were four very handsome girls to be flirted with seemed to increase his fascination.

All the girls agreed that he had a power of attraction.

They discussed him with their usual frank candour. They agreed that there was that about his carven ugliness, his aloofness of air, his clipped reticence that had an allure, a magnetism. He was the type, they agreed, that can cast a spell over women.

"I think he's conceited," said Barbe. "That aloofness is swelled-head, that reticence the brusqueness of self-sufficiency."

"Of course he's conceited—a little, and for the time being," said Mary. "You can't be brilliant and young and escape it. He'll grow out of that. . . . And even that brusqueness, it'll gain him a reputation. Women love to be bullied. If he ever goes into practice women will flock to him in crowds. If he sets up in Harley Street he'll be the darling of the Smart Set."

"A spoiled darling," said Barbe.

"No," said Lucila decisively. "He won't be spoiled. He's not the spoiling sort."

Sookey at the sink nearly released an authentic Cherry Pie Garden sniff. What did that kid know about men? She admitted that the O'Gara men were different, and that Paul might be different, but not even the influence of that house had quite removed her early impression that males were frail and violent and greedy underneath.

Mary said: "Well, I don't think he will spoil easily either. But he'll have to fight hard to save his soul. We women will do our best to spoil him. Look at us all ready to drop on our knees before him."

"That's true," said Cecilia, in her delicate, frank, amused voice. "I'm after thinking myself that he has only to crook his little finger at me, and I shall be madly in love. It's not fair for such creatures to have such a power."

Sookey told herself scornfully that she did not feel the

spell, but she did. She felt it less powerfully, there was no hint of a yoke hateful or divine in it, yet she felt resentment at Paul Geneste's lack of interest in her.

She did not like being ignored so steadily and naturally, and she felt a burning desire to convince him that she was not one to be ignored. It was because she was still lowly, a mere servant, that he did it. But she told herself that she was not a mere servant by instinct, and that one day she would prove to him she was not. She'd, in the argot of Cherry Pie Gardens, "show him."

She planned how she would show him. She was not going to be a servant all the time. When she left the O'Garas she meant to take a step higher.

Shops—she'd go into shops. This taste for dress designing Claudine had found provocative (she could see that now), that the O'Gara girls thought a little beyond the ordinary, her sense of colour and decoration which Bede O'Gara thought was a definite talent would help her in shops, help her to do well, stand out, climb . . . get a name and get money. Money to live as a swell among the swells, to meet Paul Geneste in the drawing-rooms of the swells. . . . That would "show him."

She felt this ferment of rage week after week as Paul coolly and politely wished her good day as she opened the door to him; she had to feel it so long, however, that in time it settled down into something of Paul's own indifference. She was, indeed, well on into the stage of being perfectly natural to him, when one Sunday he startled her by saying: "You have evenings off, Sookey, I suppose?"

"Yes," she said, astonished. "Wednesday."

"Could you meet me somewhere next Wednesday, then?"

She looked at him closely, and she asked herself if she had been mistaken about him. Had he been thinking of her—

the pretty gutter girl he had been mixed up with? Was he the man she thought all men to be?

His face was grave and not flirtatious. He even seemed to read her suspicions, for he grew colder, though he reddened.

"There is something concerning both of us I must talk about," he said.

She did thrill then, a thrill of anxiety. It was some threat from Cherry Pie Gardens of course.

"I'll meet you at half-past six on Wednesday by the pond in Southwark Park," she said, and led him up to John.

CHAPTER XX

In a sprawled acreage of bedevilled grass, shrill with swarming children, Sookey waited for Paul Geneste, and through the pearl dusk glow that makes a London summer evening Paul came.

He said to her at once: "There was a lout who pretended to know about the business of Herbert Young."

"Alf Naylor," she said, her heart beating with a sudden quickness.

"That was the name. What is he like?"

Sookey described the raw red of Alf Naylor's degenerate face and his conspicuous slouchiness.

He nodded his head, but explained nothing. Sookey watching him, knowing that he would fence—his sort did for the sake of women—said:

"Alf Naylor's in prison, went up for a stretch just before Bert Tavener went away."

"No doubt," said Paul. "But he's not in prison now."

"He's threatening you?"

After a look Paul Geneste laughed in the way of the old Paul: "I had better tell you for your own safety," he said. "Besides, you make one frank, Sookey. I've been followed about for the past two weeks by a seedy and unpleasant ruffian whom, gradually, I suspected to be Alf. Your description makes it plain that it is Alf."

Sookey understood: "He means to touch you for some money—blackmail."

"It has not come to that yet," said Paul, and his long gnarled face grew grim. "He's trying to pluck up courage. I don't doubt it will come though."

"It's because Bert is away. He wouldn't dare if Bert were home."

"You think that Bert's fist is a greater restraining influence than mine?"

"Of course it is," she said briskly. "Besides, Bert knows things about him."

"Yes, a burglary wasn't it? Do you know the facts?"

"No," said Sookey. "And if I did, what good would they be to you? You're a gentleman——"

"And not accomplished in counter-blackmail, that's true." He frowned. "Do you feel that this brute has little, if any, real knowledge, Sookey?"

"I think he's only guessing," said Sookey. "I think he *saw* nothing. I think he only knows, somehow, that we were the last people with Herbert Young, that we were probably with him when he died. Our not saying anything about it is the thing that makes him feel he has a hold."

"That's what I feel," he said. "And it's more than two years ago and he must be without other witnesses or evidence."

"I'll keep out of the way, Mr. Geneste," said Sookey quietly. She was the only other witness in England.

He looked at her sharply and laughed again.

"That wasn't the only reason I spoke about it to you," he said.

"I know," she smiled back. "You wanted to save me from being dragged into it."

"There's no hiding motives from you, Sookey. You're really a remarkable girl." He thought for a minute. "Well, since you have made me certain who this chap is, and since you'll be on the look-out yourself, I'll know how to deal with him."

"And how will that be?"

He looked at her ruefully for a moment, then he said:

"As a last resort I'll threaten the police; he has no real evidence. . . ."

"He'll know that's only bluff."

"You're rather frightening, Sookey," he said, regarding her attentively. "Do you dissect everybody as cleverly as that? . . . You're right; I *don't* want to be mixed up in this sort of thing at this stage of my life—or any. But still——"

"Wait a minute," said Sookey, thinking. Then: "Mr. John says the hospital schools close in a week or two's time. . . . Aren't you going somewhere for a holiday?"

"Yes, to the Continent—but why?"

"That's it," she cried. "Couldn't you start earlier—this week?"

"I could, but why?"

"Bert Tavener will be back in England in five weeks."

"Do you mean," he said, hot and red, "I should bolt like a dog with my tail between my legs until Bert can come home to save me?"

"Isn't it better to leave Alf to those who know how to handle his sort, Mr. Geneste? You're a gentleman, and not much good at this rough stuff. You'll probably make a mess of it"—shrewdly—"for all of us."

"Not flattering, that, but there is truth in it," said Paul.

"Of course there is truth in it. If you keep out of Alf's way until Bert comes home, Bert will deal with Alf. You'll be saving trouble all round."

"It's logical of course," said Paul, trying not to give in too easily.

"It's common sense," she cried. "You know I'm right, Mr. Geneste. You're only holding out because your sort don't like even to seem to be funking things. But is that worth risking all of us—to say nothing of your career as a doctor?"

"My career——" he gasped. "By Jove, you *are* an astonishing girl, Sookey."

"You mean my knowing about your career," she said, blushing under his gaze. "But I've heard the O'Garas talking about that."

"I mean a great deal more than that," he said, with that sudden sweeping enthusiasm that comes to his type when it throws aside reserve. "I mean you, all of you, the Sookey of now who was once the Sookey of Cherry Pie Gardens. Do you know you're remarkable?"

Sookey had a suspicion, but she wanted to hear. She wanted to have the change described by one who could note the difference. She wanted to hear what effect she had had, after all, on this man whom she had thought indifferent.

"How?" she asked.

"Are you fishing, Sookey? Don't you know? But you must know how you've changed—manner, way of speaking, of carrying yourself, of outlook, of thinking *even*, in deportment, dress——"

"No," said Sookey, with decision. "No, not dress. I've got my chance to wear what I want now, that's all."

"Yes—I remember you were a strange blossom for Cherry Pie Gardens even in the old days. That's a development then." His eyes examined her curiously, eagerly. "And I wonder if it all isn't only development. You always had character—that keen little face of yours is the same"—he blushed suddenly, and Sookey knew why—"only more mature. The promise was there—always. You're the same girl, only —but——"

"The same girl—only learning," she said.

He nodded. He said unexpectedly: "I don't wonder at the O'Garas thinking you a marvel."

Startling that, certainly. The O'Garas had talked of her,

after all; had told him of her talents, had discussed her with him. . . . And yet never a word of it had come to her. Surprised, elated, too, that he should know, she cried:

"The O'Garas talked about *me?*"

"Did your ears never burn?" he laughed back. "Yes, rather, they talk about you. You're like a jewel they have discovered. The way you plan dresses, the way you plan rooms, your sense of colour and decorative values." He went slow. "The—er—sharp way you take hold of the right tricks of speech and manners and—er—your instinct for the things that count—all that sort of thing."

"And—and do you think they mean it?" she asked thirstily.

"My dear child, I can see the truth of everything they say with my own eyes."

She was glowing, thrilled, buoyant with elation. She was eighteen, avid for praise, and this was the first real revelation of her advancement she had had. She cried eagerly:

"What do they think about me? What do they think I can do?"

"There are half a dozen answers to that," he smiled, finding the play of eagerness, colour, animation and pride in her vivid and piquant face enormously worth attention. "Bede seems to think that one day you will stagger the world with a new fashion in room decoration and colour effects. Mary thinks you'll—he coloured a little—"you'll marry some tremendous lord, like Lady Hamilton." He hoped that Sookey was only vaguely aware of Lady Hamilton's beginnings. "Cecilia thinks you'll be nothing less than *the* Court Dressmaker with the whole of Mayfair fighting for your attention. While Lucila . . ."

"What does Lucila say?" asked Sookey with a certain stiffness. Lucila was his favourite, and he hesitated over Lucila. But it was not because of Lucila so much as what Lucila had said. He revealed it with embarrassment.

"Lucila thinks that you must be the daughter of a princess and that you were kidnapped at birth."

Sookey was impressed by Lucila's opinion. Queer how people seemed to feel that she must be of mysterious gentle parentage—Lucila, Mr. Meggie, the gossiping women of Cherry Pie Gardens, had all felt it. Queer how it fitted in with some vague, interior conviction of her own.

But she said: "And what do you think, Mr. Geneste?"

"About your future? Do I know enough about you? But I do know, anyhow, that whatever you make up your mind to do you will do—that was always in your face."

They were silent for a while, Sookey's elation leading her to a vision of glories.

"You'll get on, Sookey," he said.

"Yes," she agreed. "I'll get on. I mean to."

"Oh, you've planned it all?" he smiled. He really was eager to hear now, this strangely bizarre, beautiful and vital creature held him with a steady fascination.

"In a way," she said slowly, "I mean to get on through all them—those things they say I'm good at." Excitement was making her diction shaky. "I'm going into a shop next."

"A shop," he said, rather disappointed.

"A shop—shops," she went on. "The dresses, decorations, colours—all those things come out of shops, West End shops. I'll have to learn things there. But not much. A girl I knew and these O'Garas have taught me a lot already. Wot—what I mean is, I won't stay in shops. I'll go on. Up. I'll make the shops I'm in distint——" (She couldn't get distinctive in her excitement.) "Sort of celebrated. You know, special designs that'll be all the rage. Crowds will come, as Miss Cecilia says. . . . Well, that's how I look at it. The shops I'm in will become celebrated through the things I do."

"That means you'll be celebrated too, Sookey," said Paul,

more concerned with the vivid and lovely fire that seemed to play under her fine skin, in her dark eyes. He almost jumped at her scornful:

"O' course! That's what I aim at, being celebrated. Somebody big! People crowding to get me to do things, paying any money. *The* Court Dressmaker, as Miss Cecilia said."

"By Jove, that will be fine, Sookey," said he, amused. "I daresay you'll have your own shop."

"Yes. . . . But you're laughing at me." Her diction stiffened with her pose, her eyes narrowed and sparkled. "But you won't laugh then, Mr. Geneste. I'll be rich. I'll be smart—mixing with the best. I shall be run after. I shall be one with Society people—doing everything they do, spending as they do, having dresses and jewels and carriages and—and people jumping to do as I want. . . ."

"You'll cut a regular dash," he smiled.

"I'll live a life worth living," she said under fierce brows.

"I'm afraid you're rather a material little baggage, Sookey," he laughed.

"Material? What's that?" she demanded, hackle up.

"Well, all your ambitions are worldly—cash, position, glitter, enjoying yourself. . . ."

"What else is there?" she asked, surprised.

"Good Lord," he gasped. "There's everything else. That sort of thing scarcely counts——"

"Oh, rats!" she said, disgusted, incredulous. "You know it's the only thing. What about your own career?"

"Mine? Heavens, how does that figure?"

"Ain't you aiming to be the best man in your line—research the O'Garas call it—in England?"

"I'm going to have a good shot at it," he said, suddenly grave.

"What are you doing it for if it isn't to be top dog?

Ain't it to get money an' fame an' have the swell crowd at your feet, an' lording it among 'em? What's the good of it otherwise?"

"Good Lord!" he could only say again. And then: "My dear child, what put all that into your head? Do you happen to know what research work means?"

"Not exactly; but from what I've heard——"

"It means," he said, not attending to what she had heard, "cutting oneself off from all that the—that your sort think worth while. It means becoming a latter-day hermit so that one can concentrate without interruption. It means cutting the glitter—even in minted sovereigns, for there's no money in it, Sookey.

"But, surely . . . I mean if you're the best one in England?"

"That's the point, Sookey. In England you can make a fortune out of sausages but not out of science. Even if I got to the top of the tree, if I ever do, research will bring me in rather less than you will be paying in rent for that swagger West End shop of yours."

Sookey was sure he must be joking. To her to be first in anything meant riches and glitter.

"But Miss Mary, the others, say that the whole of the Smart Set would flock to you if you set up in Harley Street——"

"In Harley Street," he jerked, looking sharply at her. "They said that?"

"Yes. Isn't Harley Street research?"

"Anything but," he said with the cynicism of youth. "But Mary thought that, eh? And the other girls?" His eyes were reflective and unsettled. "I wonder why?"

"Because all the women would be mad about you," she said scornfully. "They'd come in crowds—if only to be bullied by you."

"Ah!" He drew breath sharply, looked strangely at her. "They really said that?"

"All of them. They were sure of it. They said you were just the type to—to draw all the women. Your manner would do it."

"The Abernethy touch, eh?" he murmured. He was looking down at his knees like a man surprised in a guilty thought. He said softly: "How queer. And do you think they are right, Sookey?"

"Oh, they're right," she said. "You're just the kind of man whom"—she reverted to Cherry Pie Gardens—"women go a mash on."

He winced, his face twisted with a queer irony.

"My manly beauty?" he said mockingly.

"Your ugliness," she said with brisk frankness. His manner was irritating her. He looked at her with surprise, with understanding.

"You're a penetrating and acute little cuss, Sookey," he said. "That's it, I suppose. Ugliness has a pull. Voltaire —or was it Dr. Johnson?—has a word about it somewhere. Queer!"

"What does it matter if it pays," said Sookey the downright. "If it drew the women in it would mean big money, wouldn't it?"

He stiffened, his hand clenched nervously.

"It would, Sookey, it would—but it would also mean deserting an austere and jealous lady named Pure Science."

"Who lives on nothing at nowhere," she jeered. Really she could not understand him. "What's the good in that?"

"What?" he shrugged. "Hard to say, Sookey. Only some of us are slaves to our impulses and conceits. I've got a conceit that I can do good work in research. Incidentally I may—and, of course, may not—help to save a good many lives, stamp out a certain amount of disease and misery, and

advance human progress an inch or two. But I doubt whether that counts beside the fact that I am a victim of my conceit. It's just research alone that pulls me."

"But you can do the other too, and make thousands and be——"

"On the Society page four days out of the seven with a title in the offing," he smiled. "And yet I prefer the austere lady. We're strangely and wonderfully made, Sookey, and you are perfectly right to think me a chump."

She did. But not so decisively as once she might have done. A year ago her scorn for him as a misser of the main chance would have been scorching, but she realized that a queer change had come over her since then.

It was no doubt the result of living with the O'Garas. The O'Garas were like Paul Geneste; they were gentlefolk, they could have had a good time; Cecilia and Mary and the rest were always receiving invitations to their uncle's estate in Ireland that photographs showed to be a sumptuous place, and yet they stayed on in Rotherhithe living cheerfully poor, serenely accepting a pinched and secondary existence for the same—to Sookey—obscure ideal of service that had caused their father to desert a more glorious sphere.

She thought that the O'Garas were wrong. She thought that people of common sense were in the world to grab at the main chance, but she was growing more uncertain and puzzled about it. If the O'Garas had been fools, if they had not been so fine, genuine, aristocratic and sweet-minded, she might have been certain that they were all wrong, that their abnegation was a flaw in their natures. But they impressed her. Their high-minded atmosphere impressed her. Perhaps behaving as they did was right for some people—not her, oh, no; Sookey Lee was the determined Get-On-or-Get-Out Sort—but some people might be made like that.

Paul Geneste, perhaps. . . .

He saw the contempt and puzzlement in her dark eyes and laughed. "What was it you once said?" he smiled. " 'You make me tired,' wasn't it? I'm doing that now, eh? Let's get rid of the infection. Will you walk with me as far as the gates Sookey?"

She half rose, her eyes scanning the Park as she did. Then she looked quickly at him, said:

"No, if you don't mind I'll sit out here a bit. I like to sit and think out things."

"Colour schemes and ambitions?" he said. "All right, Sookey, and may you have immense luck. . . . And you really do think that my bolting to the Continent will be the best for all of us."

"Certain of it—when can you go?"

"To-day's Wednesday—I might make it Monday."

"Make it Monday," she said sharply. "What time?"

"My dear girl. . . . How do I know! Somewhere between breakfast and, say, four o'clock."

"I'll count on that," she said.

"You can count on it," he laughed. "I wouldn't dare offend you. And, oh, I won't be coming to the O'Garas again; if that brute Alf is shadowing me, it won't do to lead him to you, Sookey. It's good-bye, then."

She looked at him strangely as he spoke, she smiled strangely as she slipped her hand into his.

"It's like you, Mr. Geneste, to think about me. But I saw that in your face the first time I met you. Good-bye, sir."

She watched him out of the park with the strange smile still on her face. When he had vanished, when there was no chance of his return, she rose.

She walked across the grass to another bench on which sat a slouchy and disreputable young man, with a red-raw and degenerate face.

She kept her eyes on this man so that he had no chance of slipping away. He seemed to draw in his shoulders as she approached, hiding his face behind an evening paper.

She sat down calmly beside him, beat his paper out of his hands with her parasol, said evenly:

"Well, Alf, what's your game?"

CHAPTER XXI

Alf Naylor crouched away from her in furtive unease, and Sookey gloried in it.

She knew that she had always intimidated him since she had thrashed him in the Gardens, she knew that her fine clothes and her fine manner intimidated him more than ever. She sat regarding him with a cool, cruel, quick-witted impertinence, and an absolute inner disgust.

She was astounded at her disgust and a little afraid of it. It seemed to be a moral weakness due to her own improvement. She knew that at one time she would have been quite indifferent to the unloveliness of Alf, would not even have seen him as she saw him now—a vile, shambling beast.

That was a strange change in her, a dangerous one in circumstances like these. She saw Alf as foul and ravening, and shrank from him. His flashy dirtiness, his ugly, filthy hands, the raw-looking degeneracy of his mean, loose face, the sense of humid and muddy viciousness that seemed to be ingrained in his very skin, filled her with a repugnance that was almost nausea. She did not want this wretch to speak to her, breathe in her direction, touch her, look at her even—and that was a dangerous thing.

In Alf's watery eyes she saw how dangerous it was. Alf's eyes cringed before her, but that wasn't all. She saw cunning, triumph, pitilessness, admiration and a ghastly, gloating appetite. She saw fear of her warring with assurance that he held the whip hand. And he said at once:

"'Allo, Sook. So I got *you* too, hey?"

"Got me how?" said Sookey, in her most distant manner. "You've got a cheek that I want to inquire into, as I see it."

He blinked, but said with a leering grin: "I got you as well as 'im, an' lummy, yor the best. Strike me, you *'as* become a swell, Sook."

"You can cut that out," she said. "What you come here about?"

"You know," he sneered, his eyes travelling with an ugly gusto over her figure. "You an' 'im, the doctor's pup. I got you tight—with no one ter interfere neither."

"You've got us? You—what the blazes *are* you gassing about?"

Strange how difficult bad language was to her who had once been absolutely unmoved by the worst oaths. Her changing nature was playing strange tricks with her. But her old fire and quickness was still with her and a new clearness of intelligence. Even as she watched Alf's furtive, greedy eyes, the plan which she had dimly perceived when she first saw Alf watching Paul and herself developed.

"You know and *'e* knows," jeered Alf. "Innercent little darling, ain't yer, Sook?"

"Not so innocent," she said pertly. "And I'll be less when you talk plain. Afraid of your tongue?"

"Not so very," he grinned. "I got you both on a little matter concerning a certain party's death."

"On what?" she cried, as though astonished.

"A party name o' 'Erbert Young. Died sudden in 'Erns Dell, Goose Common. Strain yer memory a little, Sook, me dear; it'll all come back to yer."

Sookey looked at him wide eyed—and giggled.

To Alf's amazement she sat back and giggled as though relieved.

"You get it now?" he scowled.

"Sure—but you gave me a *real* turn for the moment."

"What?" he cried, taken aback by her indifference. "You mean ter say. . . ."

Sookey played a bold hand.

"I meant to say I thought it was Old Sook. I thought you were going to split on me."

The bold move staggered him. It took the wind out of his sails to hear her treat the threat of Old Sookey as a thing of more importance than—well, what might be a charge of murder.

He began to doubt himself, but said doggedly: "That's additional, but the other thing's the twister. A killing. . . ."

She refused to consider the matter worth discussing. "Now tell us the true story, Alf Naylor," she said defiantly.

"That's all the truth I need," he blustered. "An' you'll learn it's all that's wanted. I knows things abart 'Erbert Young's death."

She cut him short: "Oh, come off it. You're a bit rocky on your onion, aren't you? Old stuff like that—more than two years old. Dead and buried and mouldy. You never had anything in that, not enough to stop a copper yawning. Try something real."

"'*Aven't* I anything?" he snarled anxiously. "Wot if I c'n tell you an' Bert Tavener, drown 'im, an' that doctor's pup were all with 'Erbert Young in that arbour? Quarrelling! Wot if I say that after that quarrelling 'Erbert Young didn't come out o' that arbour on 'is feet? Wot if I c'n say that?"

Sookey almost laughed. So that was all he knew. She jeered: "And what if the Inspector you tell says to you, 'Took you two years to remember Alf Naylor, hey, what's your little game?'"

"The man died while 'e was with you three," snarled Alf.

"Did he? I'll swear he didn't. And he died from heart disease, which isn't manslaughter. . . . Though trying to make it so is blackmail, Alf, and another stretch for you, you fool."

He was shaken, he mumbled at her, and suddenly she

blazed: "Damn your eyes, and it's because of that old fake that you've come butting in on *my game*."

"Your game, Sook!" he snivelled, and his stomach had a twinge. There are few rules in the moral code of Cherry Pie Gardens, but the most rigid, the most grim of them is "Keep thyself out of a pal's game or suffer the vengeance of the pack."

"Yes, *my* game," mimicked Sookey, as though in a fury. "Why else do you think I'm stringing that young fool along?"

She had known from the moment she had determined to tackle Alf that that was a safe line to take. Alf had only to look at her to feel that she was as dishonest as himself—of a higher grade, maybe, but of the same stamp. All his experience had taught him that when girls of Cherry Pie Gardens adopted fine clothes and a lofty manner it was for no virtuous end. He took her for granted. She was a wrong 'un, like himself; he was even a little relieved at it, for after the way she had turned him inside out he was glad of firmer ground. He knew how to deal with a girl who was a wrong 'un.

"So that's your line o' work, is it, Sook?" he said, with his furtive grin.

"I'll say nothing about my line of work," she said savagely. "All I say is, I don't want a thick-headed Jack barging in and spoiling things."

"Done well at it, too," he grinned. "Them's dossy clothes, Sook. An' I'll say you're the regular beaut, an' I alwiys thought you was pretty."

"Thinking hurts nobody," she said. "As long as you keep off the grass."

"Wot do you reckon you'll get outter 'im?" he said with a leer.

"That's my business," she said frigidly.

"Gotter partner?" he asked with meaning.

"Pah, partners do the dirty on a girl," she said.

"Then I bet you don't get all you can outter the feller. It takes a man to do that."

She seemed to look at him speculatively, a look that gave him a thrill, because he saw in it she felt the need of a man. Then she said: "I can manage my own affairs."

"That means you know you're going to muck it already," he jeered.

She shrugged: "I'll go me own way."

"An' it'd be a pity if Old Sook found you out before you could pull it off," he said with a devilish grin.

She understood him. He had dropped, anyhow for the time, the Herbert Young business, because, except as an extreme, criminals do not give away other criminals' crimes. But he was determined not to come out of this matter empty-handed. He was going to be as pitiless as any other predatory beast where there was spoil to be shared. And, since his victim was a woman, pitilessness seemed only right. His sort preyed on women, lived on women, used women as pawns merely to serve their own ends.

Besides, she could see desire in his face.

She had hooked him, then. The first part of her game, played with all her knowledge of his type, had been won. She had only to play him a little further, to make certain, for instance, that he kept away from Paul Geneste during the whole of next Monday, and she would win entirely.

She glared at him as though his threat had angered and frightened her, and he repeated it with unction: "Pity if Old Sook found you out before you could pull it off."

Under that, apparently, she caved in. She said, with a whine: "You wouldn't split, Alf. Be a sport."

"O' course I won't split," he said cunningly, "if I stands to make outter it."

"Be a sport, Alf," she wailed. "Keep away."

"That's wot I'm askin' you—to be a sport, Sook," he said, edging nearer. "I'm willing to drop me own game—a sure thing, mark you, that feller would sooner pay through the nose than let me squeal; 'e's gotter position to consider. . . . Well, I'm willing ter drop all that if you say so, Sook—but where do I come in?"

Sookey sat plucking at the knee of her dress; she stared at Alf under her brows; she said presently, reluctantly:

"It's dirty work holding a girl up, Alf."

"I don't want ter be dirty; I want ter be fair . . . I want ter 'elp. You're a smart piece o' goods, Sook; you're sumthin' worth helping. An' in a case like this you 'aving a man 'andy, so to speak—— 'Ow much are you going to touch him for?"

His hand was on her shoulder; it was as much as she could do not to flinch.

"I don't know that I'll get anything—not definite to handle," she said slowly.

"There's the woman workin' alone speaking," he jeered. "You want a man in this, I tell yer, you an' me in double-strings. You with your looks— Cor, you're a looker, Sook" —his fingers clutched her shoulders. "You with yer looks and dressiness, and me being a man . . . What's yer lay, Sook?"

"He's going away for his holidays in two weeks' time—to Paris an' so on," she said, and stopped.

"A joy-ride for you and no pickings," he said, taking it for granted that she was to go away with Paul, though she would not have said it herself even to forward her plot. "I know that sort o' thing. He does the spending. There's no *money* in it for you, Sook."

"But he's got a lot of money," Sookey said. "In his pocket, now—he's drawn over a hundred pounds."

"Over a hundred—on him. On him—and you haven't

lifted it." Greed, contempt and amazement were in his voice.

"I've been trying to think of some way," she frowned. "It isn't so easy."

"Not when you work alone—but working with me, why, it's easy. When you going to see him again?"

Sookey tried to keep the elation out of her voice at the way he had swallowed the bait. She said: "Monday—some time Monday afternoon or evening. I shall know on Monday morning first post. I shall have to ask for time off at the place where I'm working."

"Dr. O'Gara's, I know. I followed him there last two Sundays; saw you there, Sook. Will he have the money on him?"

"Yes. He's going to show it to me to let me see I'll have a good time."

"It's a sitter," grinned Alf, elated. He thought it even more than a sitter for himself. Girls—how you could fool 'em with a little soft talk. "You listen, Sook. It's easy. When 'e comes Monday, you take 'im fer a nice walk. Take 'im somewhere dark an' quiet. . . ."

"It may be in the afternoon," said Sookey, apparently complaisant, but determined to keep Alf occupied all the afternoon.

"Well, keep 'im going till dusk," he snapped irritably. "Take 'im somewhere lonely an' quiet, because I'll be follering yer, any'ow. When yor lonely an' quiet, turn on a little love-makin'. Guess you know 'ow ter do it be this be the look o' yer. Then we'll work the old game. I'm yer outraged 'usban'. Up I comes an' makes a row."

"He won't pay you a hundred quid for that," she sneered.

"I won't arsk 'im," he leered. "I'll bash 'im . . . I'm takin' me little knuckle-dusters on purpose. When he's asleep, I lifts that money off'n him, an' the game's done."

"He'll go to the police," Sookey felt bound to say.

"Not *'e*. Go to the perlice an' 'ave 'is name in the pipers an' 'ave 'is folks an' the 'orspital people all know 'e's been caught carrying on with a married gal? Not on yer life. 'E'll lose 'is money an' keep 'is mouth shut an' be glad ter get outter it so soft. Now ain't that a plan an' a 'arf, Sook?"

Sookey, with reluctance, admitted that it was a better plan than she could think of in a month of Sundays. She raised points which he thought only natural to a reluctant surrender, though they were not quite that. She persuaded him, for instance, to be outside the O'Garas' house first thing in case she had to warn him of a change of plan, or in case the letter came by the second post. She promised to slip out of the house from time to time to keep in touch.

Having successfully arranged to keep Alf out of Paul Geneste's way all through Monday, she evaded Alf's kiss—if not a furious embrace, which was like that of an animal clawing her body—and relegated all talk of their future brilliant partnership in petty crime until such date as they had got away with the dibs.

She went back to Rotherhithe Street and had a bath. She felt the need of it. The mere presence and touch of Alf Naylor had made her unclean right through to her bones.

She made preparations for her own flight, sometimes feeling buoyant with elation at the thought that she was to take the first real step towards a fuller life, sometimes experiencing a strange misery at having to leave the O'Garas, particularly in the abrupt manner that would be necessary.

She examined a map of London in Bede's room to discover districts, and the way to districts, as far as possible from South London and as near as possible to the West End. She counted up her cash resources two or three times a day. She possessed four pounds three in savings, and she considered she ought to live for at least four weeks on that sum.

Her clothing was going to be a difficulty. As she intended to walk straight out of the house, it would be impossible for her to take a box; but she must take clothes, of which she had a fair supply now, and her small belongings. She triumphed over this drawback by making her belongings up into a number of brown-paper parcels, and through Thursday, Friday and Saturday she took one such parcel out on whatever errand she was sent and deposited them in the cloak room of Spa Road railway station.

On Sunday John told the dinner (midday) table that Paul Geneste would not call that afternoon, and not only that, but he, John, might be late on Monday, as he was seeing Paul off by a train from Victoria somewhere about four. . . . The old beggar was cutting the rest of the schools, and going on the Continent for a long summer holiday.

The mention of Paul opened a discussion on his qualities, this discussion carrying over into the scullery, where Mary and Lucila helped to wipe up. Sookey, not unwillingly, found herself involved in it.

She learnt, which wasn't new, that all in the O'Gara house expected Paul Geneste to become a great man. Having herself put a leading question, she found that Paul's estimate that a great name in research would not lead to great riches was confirmed. The O'Garas took it for granted that he must be poor; they did not even seem to resent it.

Sookey resented it. She was surprised when Mary told her quietly that money did not matter. All the best things in the world, after all, were done for something bigger than money.

"But—but doesn't he want money?" Sookey gasped.

"Probably he does—we all do," Mary smiled; "but lack of it won't or, anyhow, shouldn't prevent a man like Mr. Geneste going on with his work."

"But you said—I heard you say once, miss, that he could

earn thousands as a smart doctor in a place called Harley Street. . . ."

"He could," said Mary, "but it would be wicked if he did."

"Wicked!" gasped Sookey, thousands of pounds wicked!

"For Mr. Geneste, yes. It would be turning his back on a great work, betraying a great gift. Don't you think that is very wicked, Sookey?"

"Rather, of course it is," said Lucila, with such decision and certainty that Sookey wondered what was wrong with her that she could not see it too.

They were watching her, reading her, they laughed at her.

"Why, Sookey," said Mary, "I believe you don't believe in that."

"I don't see," said Sookey doggedly, "if one can make thousands. . . ."

"You're an awful money-grubber," said Lucila. "But what would happen to us, to the whole world, if great doctors thought of themselves and money first—and wouldn't find out all about diseases and things because it didn't pay? Why, all the great discoveries have been made by men and women who weren't properly paid for the work they did. Medicine, science, the making of machinery even; look at the poor clergyman who invented the first stocking-frame and died poor . . . painting, exploration . . . everything big has come to us through the little-paid. If those people had thought more of money than the great things within them, the world would be in a pretty poor pickle."

A concrete statement. Sookey, still the slave of the concrete, grasped it. She understood it, understood something of the devotion of the O'Garas, who preferred healing the poor to making wealth. She understood Paul Geneste. . . . She understood the devotion of all those noble men who had

thought of the world first before they thought about themselves.

A fine thing. Something within her stirred at it. She could admire—admire if she could not emulate. That sort of thing was not for her, of course. It was magnificent in others, but her nature demanded material rewards, cash payment for gifts delivered. She'd never sacrifice herself.

"You talk, Sookey," Mary was saying quietly, "as though you never did anything for love. As though you couldn't do a fine action for the sake of its fineness alone. . . ."

"I don't think," began Sookey, and then she stood still and blushed. After all, what was this tricking of Alf but—but that sort of thing? She had let Paul Geneste go away thinking he was saving her from Alf, while all the time she was taking on Alf and the risk to save him. . . . If that wasn't . . . She was startled to find that the virus for nobility was in her. She said lamely:

"I don't think I'm much given that way, Miss Mary, but—but it'd be kind of you to think well of me—whatever happens. I wouldn't do you a dirty trick, for instance, never. I hope you'll remember that."

This, a rather lame hint, was her farewell to the O'Garas.

On Monday Alf was outside before the first post came. Half an hour later Sookey went out to sweep the steps—and to tell him that her letter had not come that post.

Alf went and kicked his heels by the Surrey Commercial Docks. At midday she found an opportunity to tell him that she had had a letter from Paul; he hoped to pass her house about three-thirty or four, but he said there might be just a chance of his being kept at the hospital that day. An interesting case had come in which the head doctor (Sookey's version) wanted him to see.

Sookey knew that Paul's home was too far away for Alf to run the risk of going there and missing his man here. He

again kicked his heels in the neighbourhood, appearing furtively about three-fifteen, and remaining on duty until well after five.

At six Sookey ran the risk of going out, and, finding Alf off duty but within call in Jamaica Road (a point agreed upon), told him that Mr. John had come home (he hadn't, but Alf did not know), and had talked of nothing else but the strange case at the hospital Paul's letter had spoken of, and how clever Mr. Geneste had been in handling it.

She had enough medical jargon to convince Alf that the case was real, and that there was, as she said, nothing to do now but to wait until to-morrow. Rather surly, a little suspicious maybe, he agreed to turn up outside the house at the same time next morning.

Sookey went back home and waited. In due course John came home, and told of Paul Geneste's safe departure. She still waited. She washed up the supper things with Cecilia and Barbe and Patrick, saw the whole family safely pinned down by a round card game, put on her hat and coat, and placed the note she had written to Mary O'Gara on the kitchen table.

Then she walked out of the house. Whether any saw her go she did not know. She thought not, but she did not turn round to see. She walked straight to Spa Road station, rescued her parcels from the cloak room and, quite unmolested, took a train to London Bridge.

She had taken her decisive step into the bigger life.

CHAPTER XXII

Sookey found that the larger life was considerably bigger and tougher than it had appeared from a Rotherhithe kitchen, that, in fact, its true largeness lay in the way it could swallow one small female youth at a single gulp without even noticing it was a meal.

Her experiences were merely remarkable for their ordinariness, the burning pain in her feet at nights, and the constant sensation that dinner was very late that day.

She did not obtain a room in Bloomsbury as she had hoped, because the savings of virtue could not compete with the price-list of iniquity. In a panic she found the dirtiest hotel on earth somewhere in the neighbourhood of King's Cross, and even here the landlady seemed to resent the fact that she had come without male escort and charged accordingly. Ultimately she found exactly what she did not want in Islington, but at a price that she could pay.

From Islington she assaulted the universe.

Pretty cock-a-hoop at first, conscious of her attractive looks, cool, assured, alert over her nervousness, she began at the top as beginners do. She tried Bond Street, and the correct sides of Regent and Oxford streets, and all the great dress firms therein. She was astonished at the exclusiveness of these houses; they seemed as particular about the status of their young ladies as the First Division civil service or banks are about their chaste employees. It almost appeared as though one must have a testimonial from one's bishop in order to enter their austere service—at least, it appeared so to Sookey on the few occasions when they thought her service worth considering at all.

She tried smaller places. Nearly all of these seemed only

too happy to tell her how many of their hands had received notice only this week. It was a bad season to hunt for a job. The summer was on, London was empty, it was slightly before the days when an American invasion came along to stimulate a second spring.

Also if, as it sometimes happened, these shops weren't sacking their hands, they always wanted experience. "Where have you been?" was the first and final club to Sookey's hopes. Not being an American she thought that no amount of invention would carry a bold lie safely through the entanglements of art, craft, experience, finesse and scientific method that made the business of manufacturing and selling frocks.

In due time she was beaten back to smaller and smaller shops and to the ought-to-be-comforting thought that, after all, to climb the ladder of fame one must start on the lowest rung.

All day she walked pavements made, apparently, of uncooled lava, went into shops with greater and greater hesitation, and came out of them with greater and greater dispatch. She tried all methods of approach—from the meek and willing to the cocksure and dominant. She even, on one searing, anxious day, tried haughty contempt. She went into one smallish shop where three jaded girls were dressing a window, and said scornfully:

"Your window's hideous. It wants the handling of an expert. . . . Let me show you how?"

A Doric accent lisped at her, and presently she was showing him how. She thought it was a sure job. She saw that window in a sudden, dazzling glory of inspiration. She would dress it as few windows were then dressed even in the West End. When the Doric accent saw what she had done to set him on the path of affluence he would call an Eisteddfod together to sing her praises; better, he would beg her to stop with him at any salary she liked to name.

It was a brilliant design—she never thought otherwise. It was a perfect scheme evolved in the flash of impulse and desperation. She began by sweeping away every single article of the scores and scores the three embittered young women with stickphast faces were crowding into the space. Their slow, solemn looks of sheer horror were a joy to her—she'd show them how to make the most of a window. Into that little box of glass she introduced a scheme of green and gold. A really lovely malachite green frock in Doric accent's stock gave her that idea. Gold flowers in a brassy bowl on top of a high, slender pedestal, gold gauze trailing in an eloquent fillet from the gold flowers to the green of the floor. Standing against that bowl of gold, against golden-yellow and black fabric draped over the back of the window, floated that one lovely green dress.

It was a perfect picture, one supreme tone focusing a radiance of colour, holding the eye, enslaving it, ravishing it, alluring it. . . . That was the real treatment. Beauty instead of an overgorged, dyspeptic-looking window of half a thousand articles.

She almost saw down the throats of the embittered young women, so full and strong was their gaping as she stepped out of the window. She was not surprised. She was quite certain that they had never seen anything like that before. While on the pavement giving her design a final assessment, a man stepped out of a shop across the road. It was also a frock shop. He came to her side and giggled. That giggle seemed also to have a Doric accent.

He was still giggling when the Doric man who owned the window slid out of his door. He stared emotionlessly at the symphony in green and gold, and Sookey smiled at him, for she saw that her lovely design was causing a deep reaction. She nodded and made to pass into the shop again, a tiny touch or two and her window was finished.

"Don't trouble to come in again," said her man. He lifted his eyebrows, and even that gesture had a Doric accent, at his embittered females. They slowly and solemnly entered the windows, and with slow and solemn movements began to dismantle it. Sookey did not even argue. She knew that quantity not quality was to be that window's ideal.

She went home and ate bread and cheese and cried, and did her best to cool the raging of her bare feet on the hearthstone and blackleaded sides of her tiny fireplace.

Perhaps she had experimented on the wrong shopkeeper, as she did later when she tried to get a position by means of her dress designs—inexperience has just this gift.

One evening a passion for design swept her. It was born, no doubt, of her perpetual contemplation of dresses, and her contempt for most of them. The impulse was irresistible. She bought a quire of cheap notepaper and a tiny box of disillusioned water-colours with money she ought to have spent on food. She sat from four until the failure of her candle sketching and putting in the washes of colour as Bede O'Gara had taught her. Next day she should have gone out and hunted work, but a slight drizzle gave her an excuse for sketching and painting all through the day. Also remaining passive indoors muffled her appetite, so she was able to cut a meal, and make up for the loss of pennies spent on paper and paints.

On the following day she went her round of shops with her designs. In four places she was told that the authorities on such matters were busy and could not be seen. In three cases absent-minded men or women turned over her drawings listlessly, and handed them back to her without a word. In one case she sent in her drawings and, after an hour, received them back again without a word. In one case a man of middle age and much hair poked her drawings over one by one with a repugnant finger. Took them to a far window—for like all shops dealing in delicately tinted mate-

rials it was in semi-gloom—and poked through them again, with his repugnance growing to righteous fury it seemed.

He came back to her, and said on a snarl: "This establishment don't cater for no actresses, young lady."

Then, holding her drawings in his damp hands, he read her a burning lesson on the way that she was pandering to the growing immorality in woman's dress, how her designs—they were a little advanced for the times—were no less than incentives to impurity and fast living. How he, in his humble and lowly way, set his face against such lures of the flesh and the devil, how he, small though his business might be, was a champion of the virtues and the upholder of all that the moral code demanded. When he had Sookey dizzy with righteousness, fatigue and lack of food, he thrust the now smeared drawings into her hands and hustled her out of his shop.

When she had recovered enough that night to look over her drawings again she found that two were gone, and she knew that the apostle of morality had stolen them. They were good designs, and their value to the man of virtue was that they were the soberest in her collection. She was not even furious at the brute. What was the good? How could a poor, half starved nobody of a girl force him to disgorge, or even prove the theft?

She left her drawings at home after that, and went on with her search for mere work, conscious that her shoes were splaying out at the vamps, were turning over at the heels, and taking on that sandy-grey tinge that is the sign-manual of the down and out, conscious also that her few skirts were bulging badly, and that their bottoms were showing the floury dinginess of ingrained dust that seems to cry aloud of eternal hopeless trudging on pitiless pavements.

CHAPTER XXIII

She did get work of sorts, of course, else she would have starved.

She obtained, for instance, a job at the cotton, ribbon and small accessory side of a tiny shop owned by a buoyant and jolly man of about fifty. He engaged her with such good-tempered zest, such indifference to her lack of experience, such an airy agreement to her own terms that, almost forgetting the sensations of her soles and ankles, she nearly danced back to her room. Luck had been bad to her, she decided, because it was saving up this good job for her. This brisk and alert man was just the type to give her her chance.

She was surprised to find on the Monday when she started that the other two girls the shop employed were brand new, were as grateful for a job as herself, thought it a wonderful job. There was a great deal of confusion among them all in the first few days while they mastered the stock, but the bright and buoyant man made it easier for them by his cheery and ready excuses. In time, however, Sookey began to see that the difficulty of finding articles in the stock was due less to their inability than to the stock itself.

The shop was full of stock, crammed and overflowing with it. There was a room behind the shop gorged with stock. But it was apparently not at all the stock that the man's clients wanted.

There was a trickling and uneasy sort of custom. Small girls and harassed women came in at long intervals throughout the day, and they seemed to come in as a last resource. Nine times out of ten the article they needed was not amid that vast

stock. Worse, women and children even seemed to know beforehand that it would not be in the shop.

This began to get on Sookey's nerves, on the nerves of the other girls, even on the joyous man's nerves it seemed. While for the first four days he remained perpetually with them, helping them, explaining to agnostic customers that what they wanted was just out of stock, or on order, he gradually got into the habit of rushing out, apparently on urgent business, and remaining out most of the day.

At the end of the first week he paid them all their generous wages, and Sookey had, on the strength of it, a week of full meals which she needed, but which were unwise. At the end of the second week he paid them half their wages which left them all desperately pinched—but in a bright, genial, optimistic manner he won them over by saying that he had had unexpected bills to meet, and that finances were a bit strained this Saturday.

They were next Saturday. Sookey got rather less than half her money, and even then was better off than the other girls who had less determination, and who had not proved to the man their ability to sell several unwanted articles to disillusioned customers. Half wages were almost no use at all to Sookey, for they left her facing the alternative of paying for her rooms and starving, or eating and not paying for her rooms. She compromised, as she must, and did a bit of each to the indignation of her landlady and her own appetite.

She began to connect the strange eccentricity of the stock with this lack of wages, as she began to connect the man's dashings out on urgent business with the regular appearance of grim-faced men carrying what were undoubtedly bills, and to whom the girls had to say that the boss had just gone down to Fore Street to see his wholesalers. She understood why the man had been eager to hire not only her but an entirely new staff, and she began to be anxious.

On the third Saturday her fears were realized. The man went out in the afternoon, and did not put in an appearance at all. About closing time a snuffly little boy arrived, and said that Mr. Trollet, the cheery one, had sent him along to tell them to shut up shop, as he was detained on most important business. He could let himself in at the house door with his key.

They all stared at him aghast. They were all in debt, and they trembled to face their landladies without money. Sookey, her dark eyes sparkling, felt like murder if she could only find out where her victim lurked. The youngest of her companions in misery, wonderfully, knew.

"What pub did 'e send you from, Johnny?" she asked.

"The Catherine Wheel," said the boy, without hesitation.

The youngest shop-girl then explained her amazing perspicacity; she had a "chap" in the neighbourhood who knew all about Mr. Trollet. Mr. Trollet's urgent appointment was generally with a glass in a bar. "That's where 'e takes 'is cheerfulness all the time," she said bitterly, "torking over his great gift fer shop management with 'is pals."

They were all in despair, Sookey as much as the others; but it was Sookey who said to the boy: "You show me where The Catherine Wheel is."

Mr. Trollet was less surprised than hurt at Sookey's lack of intelligence and discretion in intruding upon him just as he was laying down as an irrefutable law, that unless heaven supplied a man with certain spiritual talents he had no hope whatever of making money in the drapery line.

He came outside the saloon bar quickly, and seemed astonished that she had accomplished this outrage merely to get her wages. "But, I say, my girl," he cried, "you know very well that if I *had* them I would have come back and paid you."

He was hurt that Sookey should think that he was dishonest

enough to try and *do* them. All the same, he came back with her, and after considerable persuasion and a great sense of injury managed to scrape together a few shillings for each of them, saying, as though astounded at his own magnanimity: "Another man would have given you all notice on the spot for this, you know."

The other girls were inclined to make it notice on the spot, but Sookey said she was going to think it over during Sunday, and was coming back on Monday; and they, like her, having nowhere to go, came back on that day.

Sookey had thought well. She meant to have all the money that was owing to her, and she presented an ultimatum. Mr. Trollet must have a clearance sale. Mr. Trollet must sacrifice as much of this dead junk of stock that cluttered his shop as would be necessary to pay them all he owed.

Mr. Trollet fought against the idea. He seemed to have a lover's passion for his unsaleable stuff. He seemed to have a queer joy in having so much of it about him. He declared that to sell so many beautiful things under cost was a crime, quite apart from its being ruination. But Sookey stuck to her guns, and the other girls, seeing her aim, backed her up. All three of them expressed such genuine willingness to go in a body to the nearest police station to denounce Mr. Trollet that he gave in.

They had their sale. It was a good sale. Articles exhibited at ruthlessly cut prices mesmerized the women of the locality. It was such a good sale that Mr. Trollet remained in his shop throughout the week, and grew more cheery and buoyant than ever. By the end of the week he was making it plain to everyone that the sale was entirely his own idea, and that it was the fruit of those certain spiritual talents that heaven had supplied him with as a means of making money in the drapery line.

He even pressed Sookey and the others to stay on with him,

when he paid them their wages and back money, promising them all a brilliant future. Sookey stayed another week, and as the returns of the sale dwindled and his optimism with it, and as the grim-faced men with bills began to pour in with an even greater anxiety because of the sale, she left.

Another job Sookey obtained, when she was at her extremity, was that of waitress at a small eating-house, a temporary job covering the two weeks in which the regular waitress underwent treatment for varicose veins. Sookey's knowledge of kitchen work was useful here, and her good looks stimulated the proprietor's impulse to keep her permanently. But the heat, the smell of the cooking, the dirt, and the dull and downright endearments of the customers, decided Sookey that, quite apart from her inclinations, she would rather starve than continue such work.

One job that really did look promising was with a plump, slow, biscuit-tinted young man from the indefinable East. He had a name that no facia writer, or any of his peculiar clientele could tackle, so he was just known as Mr. Dudo—though nobody knew why.

Mr. Dudo had a small shop in a small turning in the Charlotte Street area of Tottenham Court Road. He had a small number of pretty if exotic frocks to which he regularly added designs, a larger stock of "exclusively created" lingerie (lingerie, not "undies" yet) of a curious whipped white-of-egg and Neapolitan ice-cream style, and customers to match.

He had a strange and loyal band of clients to whom he sold, or even hired, dresses, and for whom he occasionally designed "exclusively." These customers were nearly all foreign women of every nationality—Belgians, Germans, Czechs, and so forth—and a variety of half-breeds ranging from one startling albino down to a couple of coal-black negresses. His clients, indeed, were indicative of that curious alien quarter of London in which he lived, and he accom-

modated them in the manner of his environment, talking to them in any language their birth called for, even in the Cockney English that many girls, who might be of the chorus, spoke by right of nationality.

There was no doubt about the profession of many of these women. When it was not written up in paint on their faces, their own quite frank professional "shop" made it plain. Mr. Dudo (and anyone within hearing) was the recipient of all their confidences, whether tragic through badness of trade, or gay, generally the result of linking up with some new "nice man." Mr. Dudo listened with the unexcited, slightly languid amiability with which he moved through life.

He engaged Sookey because, apparently, she came along at a time when he must engage somebody. As far as she could see, he had no interest in her eagerness, efficiency, or beauty. There appeared to be little work beyond minding the shop, some sewing, and going out to "match" material. It is more exact to say that he did show a flick of interest in this last matter. After she had been out "matching" several times, he slowly bared his very white and even teeth at her, and told her that she was the first female this side of Paris he had found to have a true sense of colour.

Most of the work in the shop was done by the feverish woman who acted as his manager. She was a tall stem of a creature, who must have had a slim, fragile beauty at one time. Now she gave the impression that she had been scorched to a harsh, fibrous aridity in a single day of harsh sun.

This woman, who like all the women frequenting the shop seemed to have only one name, Clélie, hated Sookey from the moment Mr. Dudo engaged her. Her hostility was a combined rage, pity and contempt, though why she should feel thus Sookey could not at first understand.

Mr. Dudo was lethargically indifferent to her for several weeks, during which Sookey's flesh began to firm up under

regular meals, and her wardrobe to brighten as she slowly renewed it at cost prices through Mr. Dudo's stock. Mr. Dudo believed in well dressed assistants. The woman Clélie, indeed, seemed to appear every day in some fresh extravagance of radiance, even though she spent most of her time out of it, for Mr. Dudo, when free of customers, worked in a tiny room lined with looking-glass and lit by a great skylight, designing new "creations" on the living model of Clélie's figure.

He designed them as languidly and calmly on the living models of such of his clients who wanted "exclusives." In time he passed over Clèlie, and took Sookey into the mirror-lined room to hold pins and materials, and to help generally as he built up frocks on ripe, Amazonian figures only vaguely veiled by fluffy camisoles and the other tenuous items of Mr. Dudo's Neapolitan-ice lingerie. Mr. Dudo and his clients were quite unconcerned about the process, and their very manner swept away any qualms Sookey might have felt.

She found herself taking part in this phase of the business as a matter of course. Indeed, the only person who seemed upset was the woman Clélie, who quarrelled furiously with Mr. Dudo in Walloon after each fitting. Mr. Dudo remained as calm as the Sphinx through all her fury, and Sookey did not know whether she felt scorn or pity for the creature, since she knew that youth, looks, intelligence and charm were the reasons why she superseded the woman.

On the day that Mr. Dudo had an idea for a new theatre cape, and turned Sookey, for the first time, into his living model, Clélie nearly shattered the shop in her fury.

Mr. Dudo almost lost stoicism then. He turned on Clélie with a sudden look and movement that hinted at latent savagery, and the bare half dozen words he hissed at her made the woman shrink back into a corner of the shop with a look of shrivelling terror on her face.

All the same, when, after two hours of deft and patient work in the little room of the looking-glasses, they returned to the shop, Clélie had gathered enough courage or desperation to attack her supplanter in at least three languages. What she said within Sookey's understanding sounded almost like a warning, but whether of vengeance to come or against Mr. Dudo, Sookey had no opportunity of learning. Mr. Dudo told her she could go for the day, and he stood calmly but firmly in front of Clélie until she did go.

Clélie made no other attack. Next day she arrived with much powder about her eyes and on her nose, which meant crying, and she constantly touched her body as though something there pained her. But she did not interfere again and maintained an attitude of sullen negation towards Sookey from thence on.

Sookey learnt a great deal from Mr. Dudo in the fine art of dressmaking. He was gentle, patient, detached, with an Oriental slowness and steadiness of purpose. His manipulation of fabrics on her body taught her not merely how to place shade against shade, and shade to show beneath shade, but also how the very curves and shadows of the body played a part in the colour scheming of dresses.

So accustomed did she become to playing the part of an animated inanimate model that she felt no reason to protest against taking off her blouse when Mr. Dudo had a new idea for a bodice, nor when he got her to wear one of his own fluffy, scanty camisoles as more appropriate to his designs. She accepted it as a matter of course when he took to scheming skirts over her petticoats, and then went on to petticoats themselves. Perhaps it was a look the woman Clélie gave her one day as she stood slim and boyish in bloomers and camisole, a curious look of contempt, loathing and pity which seemed to say: "We're all fools, we women—we all go the same way," that suddenly awakened her.

It was perhaps that look no less than Mr. Dudo's growing intimacy of manner that decided Sookey to leave on the day when Mr. Dudo became indolently enthusiastic about a new set of lingerie he had visualized and *must* design.

She began her rounds of the shops again with a little more knowledge but no less weariness. She received the usual repulses, she went through the process of semi-starvation. Her feet, hardened through shop work, held out longer, but in time they were throbbing and burning through the night in the old embittering way. Her clothes and shoes became shabby, and her heart became desperate.

There were moments when she was almost defeated, when she nearly scrapped her pride and wrote to Bert Tavener.

Bert had been back in England many months. He had returned from Canada with a reputation. He was coming more and more into the public eye, and after each one of his fights his name figured more frequently in the sporting gossip pages of the newspapers. He was obviously doing well and was regarded as a promising man in boxing. That meant, since he and his mother were careful people, that he had a good deal of money behind him now. Sookey knew that he would be quite willing to let her have some of it if she asked.

There were times when she nearly did appeal to him, when she was ready to swallow her boasts and take anything if only the price of a new outfit or a good meal. Something, however, usually happened to save her—temporary work during a sale, for instance—and finally a shop in the Uxbridge Road district saved her for all time.

She had entered it in despair and interviewed the manageress in her room with a fatal sense of failure. As she had talked to the hard-faced alert woman a man had come into the office, told the woman to go on with her interview, and had stood at the window back to her humming and jingling money in his pocket.

She had practically been dismissed when this man said briskly over his shoulder: "Can you draw frocks? Yes! Well, draw that one, then."

He indicated one on a stand, picked up a small pad of paper and a pencil, and thrust them into her hand. As she moved to a table he said: "Do it standing. Rough sketch will do if it can be accurately followed. Indicate colours and material in lettering."

Sookey was never so grateful to Bede O'Gara for the trick of rough sketching he had taught her. She managed to get the dress excellently in a few bold blocked strokes. The man nodded at it, said again: "Do that one as you walk up and down before it. Do it in a way so that nobody would notice. Like this."

He strolled indolently backwards and forwards before the figure as a woman might stroll before a shop window. He made little snatching notes of it on the pad concealed in his hand. Sookey caught his idea and did the same.

The man grunted over her sketch, said: "Now look hard at that model. A good long look. Remember everything about it, colours, trimmings, design, everything. Then turn your back on it and draw it from memory."

When he had studied her drawing he said: "Very good indeed for a first try. You've got a good method, too. You're engaged."

Sookey became a pirate.

Her job was to go about the West End and make sketches and notes of the latest and smartest frocks in the windows of the big shops. She made these notes boldly or by stealth, or sometimes carried the details of the dress away in her mind to be drawn in the nearest tea-shop. Her sketches were the source of all the "Latest from Paris," "Real West End Model" frocks that this shop supplied to its smart suburban clientele. They were either made with a few slight altera-

tions from the dress Sookey had copied, or they were often a bold and unscrupulous replica of the dress.

This was Sookey's steady job at last. Not only did her sketching win approval, but her suggestions for alterations won considerable approval, Hector Crab, the owner of the shop, telling her candidly that they were more often than not improvements on the original design.

She showed him no original design of her own. She felt no impulse to do so. She had lost a desire for designing on her disillusionment. She felt that her gift was only useful in suggesting details here and there.

For the rest her ambition slept, she was only too content to have a regular place, to earn good wages and to live without anxiety. She was sunk in her new sensation of comfort for the time being.

She was in this condition when she met Claudine Atherell again.

CHAPTER XXIV

Claudine floated into Sookey's life again on that spate of females that makes the pavements of the West End almost terrifying to the male ten minutes after the great shops close.

Claudine swept down on her, enveloped her, submerged her in a flood of duchess gush. There never was such a rosy and absorbing delight as Claudine's renewal of friendship.

Sookey was in a condition needing companionship. Her work keeping her mainly away from her shop, she had formed no intimacies with the girls in it. She was without friends and ready to make friends, ready to make friends with the imperial Claudine, though the saccharine exuberance of Claudine did a little cloy her cool unsentimental mind.

Still, Claudine was someone, and she went with Claudine to an A.B.C. tea-shop, and chattered with Claudine and listened to Claudine's chatter. And if she was rather critical of Claudine she was none the least pleased to meet her again.

Beside, Claudine said she had improved, that she had changed almost out of knowledge, she was wonderful. She seemed almost awed, almost intimidated by the change in Sookey, to take, naturally, a second place instead of the first. She said several times: "And who would think you were the old Sookey of Old Kent Road." She said it so often and with such wonder that in time she realized that she might be putting her foot in it, for she added: "But then I always knew there was something in you, Sookey. I knew you were a cut above that sort of thing. . . . Remember how we nacherally chummed up, Sookey?"

She said it in a pleading tone fearful of offending. Yet she need not have been fearful. Her words were a tribute.

Every startled look she gave Sookey was an item of pride and signified the immensity of the strides Sookey had made.

It seemed to startle her to learn that Sookey was in her own line, in a shop. She showed less concern when she learnt where that shop was, yet there was anxiety in her voice when she asked: "What is your po-sishion there, Sookey dear? At the counter?"

She seemed to hang on Sookey's answer, perhaps because Sookey delayed it for half a minute. She felt it would not be wise to tell another shop girl how Mr. Crab employed her, yet she had to explain how she was out and about so far from her shop. She fell back on her memory of Mr. Dudo's shop. She was, she said, mainly occupied in "matching."

"I know!" cried Claudine, with a sudden animation and good humour. "You were always one for colours." She began to talk about herself.

She had left her old place, she said, with a careful slanting glance at Sookey—she'd been ill. She'd had a rough time, she admitted, but it was all for the best, as she saw *now*. Now she had a very fine place indeed. She was in one of those smart, small shops in a turning near Bond Street. An exclusive and up-to-date shop, where they went in for these skimpy new fashions that some thought were going to be all the rage. Claudine thought they were ugly and immodest herself.

That is, she did for less than a minute. On Sookey's championing the new fashions because they had more dash, line, colour, and even comfort, she climbed down, she wriggled backwards, was all agreement and interest, was all for making Sookey talk her fill of the new fashions.

But Sookey, for the moment, was too interested in her old acquaintance. Claudine, of course, Sookey said, was in her old line, designing. Claudine, with the barest hesitation, admitted it . . . well, as she told herself, she hoped she would be in time, if at the present all she did was to employ

her clever needle in the dressmaking room. Sookey asked if she had to take work home, and how she got on with Mrs. Stoach over that.

"Don't you talk to me about that old hussy!" cried Claudine, in memory of the way Mrs. Stoach had turned her out for a matter of two months' rent owing. "I left her long ago. I couldn't endure her ways any longer." She blinked and saw an advantage. "You see, Sookey, I told her off pretty straight for the way she treated you, an' though, with tears in her eyes, she begged me to stay, there was always that strained feeling between us—because of what she did to you, you see—and a person of my temperament couldn't stand it."

She was, she said, in lodgings at New Cross, but liked them so little that she was looking out for others. Where was Sookey living? Sookey had a room in a fine old house in a fine decayed street in Hammersmith, and Claudine was in raptures over the neighborhood. Such a refeened district. She didn't know why she stuck to South London herself—matter of habit, but she'd always had a mind to go up West one of these days. . . . And since she was uncomfortable in her present place. . . . Did Sookey happen to know of any rooms in her district?

Sookey knew of rooms going in her own house. She knew, indeed, that if she could get a friend to share the floor of the house with her, the landlady would be willing to throw in the third room of that floor cheap as a sitting-room, and she had felt the need of the sitting-room ever since she had realized there was a chance of getting it. But although the sitting-room leapt into her mind as Claudine spoke, she hesitated about mentioning it.

For all Claudine's gush and friendliness, she was not certain that she liked the girl. There was an indefinable air of seediness about her; her would-be smart clothes were tawdry

and flash. This might be merely the result of the girl's illness and hard time, but Sookey thought it was because she herself knew better now. She knew, for instance, that Claudine's airs and refinements were vulgar and false. She saw that she was merely a naturally common-minded creature, aping her betters, and aping them wrongly. Sookey had studied the real article first-hand, ever since she had been in the West End; knew how that article should talk and behave from her own instincts; and Claudine was merely a vulgar, empty caricature of good breeding. Also there was something about the girl, a feline furtiveness under her gush and anxiety to be friends that made Sookey suspicious of her. She hesitated, but in the end she succumbed.

After several tea-shop meetings, after Claudine had actually started to look about for rooms in Hammersmith, after Claudine's pointed hints at the desirability of their living together, Sookey gave in. Perhaps it was less affection for Claudine than a desire to have that sitting-room and to have something that made noises and motions like a personal friend.

Claudine obtained a room in the house, and they shared the sitting-room between them. For the first time in her life, Sookey entered into the strange joy of adventuring upon personal taste in furnishing, a profound and noble sensation considerably mitigated by Claudine.

It was Claudine's sitting-room, too, and Claudine was the victim of hallucinations in the matter of taste. Claudine was perfectly certain that no "reel lady" could exist unless surrounded by many ribbons and much bamboo. She liked nicknacks on the mantel-board, too, and brackets everywhere, and articles she called "so dinky" on those brackets, and suffocating swathes of fabric on almost everything. A bold severity of design seemed to her almost as indecent as exposing a stark body.

Sookey had to fight her almost chair by chair. Not only

was Claudine sure that what she liked was the loftiest pinnacle of refinement and Sookey's ideas outrageous and not "quait naice," she had also learnt that the woman who ran her shop under the name of "Poppée" was actually a lady of title. Not only that, but there was a real lord always in and out of the place, and most of the clients were aristocrats with handles to their names. She used these facts as weapons to resist Sookey's scheme on the ground that to question the taste of a girl who worked daily among so much exalted breeding was a crime little short of high treason. She made so much play with her "Lady Poppy would do this," her "Lady Poppy always did that," that quite early Sookey began to realize that her instinct against living with the girl had been a sound one.

There might have been a break at once, but Claudine always gave way. Even in the face of Sookey's most outrageous intentions, even before the sacrilege of Sookey's contemptuous "Oh, dry up about your Lady Poppy—your Lady Poppies are the people that you and I were put on earth to teach taste to," she ate dirt at once if Sookey hinted at a separation. She became so humble that her crawling spirit disgusted the more resolute girl, and even the fact that Claudine said she did it because she was so devoted to darling Sookey did not make her like her more.

When they had got through the furnishing, things became a little better, for Claudine enticed Sookey back into the delights of dressmaking. Within a day Claudine's table in the sitting-room was scattered with gorgeous-coloured stuffs, and the old discussions of design and colour that had been so fascinating at Mrs. Stoach's were renewed.

Sookey found that if she thought Claudine more foolish than ever in the matter of dress design, her own mind had become more clear, mature and decisive. Instead of playing second fiddle to Claudine, she talked down to her, laid down the law—always an attractive position for a dominant mind.

More, Claudine always caved in under the attack, always agreed in the end that she supposed Sookey was right, though as for herself she had no taste or respect for these new-fangled and immoral ideas in frocks.

Sookey enjoyed these battles. Not only did they prove that she had now risen superior to this once lofty creature, but the re-awakening of her creative faculties was a pleasure. She found that they came to the surface again with a vigour and power more certain than of old, as though they had gained virtue by lying fallow. It gave her a strange exhilaration to build up and create, to ignore Claudine's materials, even, and sketch out ideas on a pad, putting in her own tinted schemes with water-colours, memories of Mr. Meggie's dyes flocking irresistibly to her aid. The ease and assurance that seemed to come out of nowhere dazzled her at times. And Claudine's admiration was heady. She was astonished at Sookey's gift in drawing, and her awe in watching the designs grow was real. A lot of Sookey's annoyance was dissipated by Claudine's expert and concentrated interest in her work.

These evenings of argument and creation stimulated her ambition, too. It awoke from the drowse into which comfort had cast it. Her old urgent determination to make a name for herself grew. She even felt that these evenings were preparation, practice and training in those gifts that would one day win her renown.

She felt, too, that her social manner had ripened to a state fitting her for the rich and glittering life of her dreams. The O'Garas had only been the good, solid foundation here. Since she had come to the West End she had determinedly mastered her nervousness and seized all opportunities for mixing among the glorious people. Whenever she could afford it, she had lunched or dined at good restaurants, and, even with Claudine on the scene, she made a point of lunching once or twice a week at such a place, but never with Claudine.

She had, whenever she could, spent 10s. 6d. on a stall, even though her finances proclaimed that the pit or the 5s. circle was her limit. She wanted to mix with the life which seemed to her the only true life; she wanted to study its citizens and all their mannerisms. She even chose social comedies for her amusement, because she instinctively realized that the stage is the best educator in civilization.

Numberless trivial incidents taught her that her study of the lordly life was having results. The attitudes of commissionaires and waiters were excellent tests. A conversation through two long intervals at a play with a neighbour whose address was obviously Mayfair taught her that she could hold her own without any suspicion of her Cherry Pie Gardens upbringing creeping in. One day, too, a young couple sitting at her table at lunch asked her who were playing at Hurlingham that afternoon in a manner which made it certain that they considered she was of the class likely to know. Nor did her ignorance seem to make them feel that she was of a lower order. They spoke to her as though she felt their need of going somewhere even artificially rural on a day like this and in a hectic season such as this was proving.

Yes, she would be accepted anywhere now as a woman of breeding. She even felt this reaction when she met her sister Min.

Min was really her half-sister, the daughter of Old Sookey and one of her vague husbands. She was rather like what Old Sookey must have been as a young woman—dark, strange, enigmatic in her beauty. She was a trifle prim, and always had been, and for that reason had taken situations as a housemaid as far from her mother and Cherry Pie Gardens as possible.

She had, like her mother, served in good West End houses, and Old Sookey's shrewdness in her had led her to make a good marriage. After several engagements, she had become

the wife of a man owning a paying garage in Bayswater, and, in her more prim way, she was as aspiring as Sookey herself.

Sookey, on her pirate round, met her shopping in Oxford Street; but Sookey had to do the recognizing. She saw that Min could not believe her eyes, that her senses refused to allow her to admit that this splendid beauty was her sister, Young Sook of Cherry Pie!

When there was no doubt about it, she was subtly hostile, subtly suspicious. Sookey knew why. Min, like Alf and the rest of Cherry Pie Gardens, felt that girls of their alley did not assume this distinction of manner and richness of dress unless they were "ruined." The prim housewife on the rise was not going to have anything to do with a loose-liver, even if she was her sister.

It amused Sookey to prove, not so much by words as by manner, that she was nothing of the sort. It *was* amusing. Min, who had served exalted mistresses, had to fight hard not to revert to her manner towards those mistresses when she perceived that not vice but natural distinction had brought Sookey to what she was. She took Min to a small restaurant, ordered a careful meal, and watched her embarrassment as the servant and the sister warred for supremacy.

No doubt that Min was impressed, that she found it hard not to treat her sister as a superior being who paid wages to girls like her. Min even gave herself airs in order to show Sookey that she was on the same social footing. She bragged of the way mistresses had thought her "quite the lady," and how neighbours in Bayswater were awed by her refinement. And she said she considered that she and Sookey had every reason to be a cut above most people because of what their mother had been in her young days.

"What was Old Sookey in her young days?" Sookey asked eagerly; but nothing auspicious came of that, though Min seemed to feel that it was auspicious.

"Ma," said Min, "was never in low houses—always in the very best. I've heard her say so. . . . She was with the Duchess of Hellans, with Lord Marple's family, with Lady Fulking, the Ruthins, an' several others. And they all thought a lot of her. I remember as a kid finding some letters from some of those people; there was one from the Fulking house, I know. I got a clout over the ear for nosing into Ma's drawers, but it only shows how well thought of she was. She was most ladylike. . . . It's my belief she was a a sort of companion to those people, not a real servant. I can't help thinking that; see 'ow the ladylike manner comes out in us. . . ."

Min was rather boring after a time. She was far too ladylike in her own way, as Claudine was far too ladylike, to suggest the real thing. Once the excitement of noting the effects of her own great progress on Min had passed, Sookey was glad to part with her. She felt that the difference between Min and herself was astonishingly marked, so marked that she wondered if they really did have the same blood in their veins. Apart from her tribute to her advancement, Min meant nothing. She was leaving Min far behind in her march towards the glittering life.

The re-awakening of her spirit had a reaction on Claudine also. During the three months they lived together before Bert Tavener found her out again, Claudine seemed to improve in herself if not as a companion. Her moral fibre steadily toughened, as though the interest Sookey brought into her dishevelled life braced her, stimulated her ever-ready vanity to new activity.

She grew less dispirited. She lost her whine, she became more ladylike than ever, which was a pity. She even carried this new spirit to "Poppée's," it seemed, and with good effect. Her position there became more settled, and she gave greater satisfaction. She stopped grousing about her treatment by

undiscerning employers, began to admit that it reelly was not such a bad place.

"It's because they reelly begin to reck'nize my worth," she simpered. "They're beginning to see I'm not an ordinary, common sort o' girl. Lady Poppy was quait complimentary to-day over a little thing I did. As I always say, one's worth *will out*."

In time, inevitably, she came to believe she really was the "brains" of "Poppée's," and to behave accordingly.

Sookey became more certain in her mind that their companionship could not endure.

CHAPTER XXV

THE reappearance of Bert Tavener was characteristic of Bert.

Sookey, sketching a dress in Regent Street, heard an off-hand voice say across her shoulder:

"Hallo, Sook! I've been looking for you."

"Have you, Bert?" she said, putting in the last touches of her drawing. "How long? Since you saw my hat thirty seconds ago?"

"About four-five months," he grinned, and took her hand. "Gee, you're a corker."

"Gee?"

"Learnt that in Canada. An' a lot of other things too—how to pull in the dollars, one of 'em."

"And how to put on those clothes without shuddering," she said crisply.

Bert had bloomed in many ways and particularly in garments. They were the clothes that men of a certain type apparently put on for fear that others might overlook their financial worth and natural substance. They had an exotic brightness and an erotic cut. The waistcoat was a trifle painful, and there was rather too much flash about the general scheme. Otherwise Bert was little changed. A certain moral inflation, a certain assurance of his international significance filled his indurated calm, but that was all. It gave him a slight bumptiousness but did not coarsen him.

"Do we stand here back-chatting?" he smiled, ignoring the remark about his clothes.

"And you simply screaming to give me lunch," she said.

"Thought-reading must be your natural gift," he said. "Come along."

He headed straight for the restaurant with the most gilding in the neighbourhood. Sookey only succeeded in checking him at the door.

"Don't you be afraid, Sookey," he said loftily. "I've tackled places in Canada and the States that make this look like a 'Good Pull up for Carmen.' Step in, I'll show you all the tricks."

"I'm not dressed for it," said Sookey. She meant that nothing on earth would take her into that place with that suit. "I want somewhere where we can talk, too."

They found a place, and Sookey throttled an order for everything expensive from hors d'œuvres to champagne, and took an entrée and coffee in a manner which Bert described, not without admiration, was "quite la-de-da."

"Gee," smiled Sookey. "Why not?"

"What's wrong with me clothes?" asked Bert, ignoring all frivolity addressed to a coming champion.

"You'll be certain I have no taste if I tell you, so what does it matter?"

"Same old Sookey," he said evenly. "Haven't changed in the brain-box, anyhow."

"Have I otherwise?"

"Gosh, yes," he said with a flash of candour. "You're making me scared stiff of talking to you." He recovered his opinion of himself. "As to the clothes, the smartest tailor in the Strand told me these were the last word, an' his word is good enough."

Further to support his *amour propre* he pulled out by a fob and gold seal a very large, very much scrolled and chased gold hunter watch and looked at it with a yawn that revealed the gold mounting of his teeth.

"Hide some of it," said Sookey, "it's blinding me."

"Presentation," he said, waving the watch. "Montreal."

"Tell me all about it."

There was a lot to tell. Bert felt it only fit and proper to the man he was to tell it at length. Canada had proved a series of victories, heavily garnished with dollar purses. He had come home with £3,000 in the bank and the prospect of adding to it shortly. He was fighting a man with a name that sounded like unjustifiable homicide, in the next three months, and he hoped to make fifteen hundred to two thousand pounds out of that. And there would be any amount "on the side" coming in, cinema rights, music-hall tours, and what not else. He was certain of beating his man. "Good fighter but a has-been," said Bert calmly. "We've taken him on so's to catch the public eye and draw the champion's attention to me being after him."

"When will you be champion, Bert?" she asked.

"No hurry," he said judicially. "I gotter put some money away first—being a champion is risky, financially, I mean, as well as otherwise, because when you go down you go down hard." They did in those days before "coming back" was the fashion. "Be the same token the champion won't be in a hurry to meet me until he has got all there is to get. It's a matter o' good managing, you see. He's got a good manager, and so have I."

It was certain that Bert Tavener was a man of importance and promise, that he knew it, that he resented slightly her not being awed by it. Much of his talk was to show how he had "got in with the big bugs," their friendship for him, the way they took him to dinners and race-meetings, and what not else. He had some real information, too. He had, for instance, moved his mother out to Sidcup partly because she and Goose Common were unknown in Sidcup, partly because the Irish peasant in her yearned for the country. He had behaved finely and affectionately to his mother. He had given her a pretty little house with enough ground, as well as

a servant and a gardener to browbeat. He had given her furniture and silver and dresses, and if she wanted a motor-car she could have it. But she did not want one, partly because she was afraid of the snorting beasts and preferred shanks's mare, partly because she was naturally simple-minded. He lived with his mother at Sidcup, though what with training and tours and the need to stay in town on business he was away from home a great deal.

"Being so much at home," he said, "probably made me miss you here."

"Where, exactly, did you expect to find me, Bert?"

"Somewhere near the best shops," he said. "You see, I called on them O'Garas soon after I landed and found you had gone. I somehow guessed it wouldn't be into service again. And if it wasn't that I knew it would be shops—an' you'd want the best shops, Sook. So I came up to the West End whenever I could and walked through all the streets we walked through that time we had our outing. I knew I was bound to meet you in 'em some day—an' so I have."

"And it took four months," she said, touched.

"It might have taken a year, so I'm that to the good," he said. "What about this leaving them O'Garas in such a hurry? They're nice people, an' it ain't like you to do things on the sly, Sookey."

Sookey told him the reason for leaving the O'Garas, and it brought unexpected news of Paul Geneste.

"He wrote me a note just after I got back," said Bert. "No, it wasn't about the Alf Naylor business—Alf's all right, he's serving a stretch of seven years. It was about you, Sookey. This Geneste felt kind of responsible for you. He's seen the O'Garas since you went, of course, and put two and two together. He guessed that somehow he'd led

Alf your way and that was the reason for your bolting."

"That was kind of him," said Sookey, feeling a little glow that Paul had remembered her, felt for her.

"Oh, that Geneste isn't a bad chap," said Bert the important. "Good fellow, if standoffish. I heard in Cherry Gardens that his father expects him to be a big bug one o' these days. I suppose he's growing the manner."

No more news about Paul than that. No particular news about her mother. Old Sookey was going on as Old Sookey would. She had another husband, a hank of a creature without a punch, Bert thought, but drawing good money as a ham and beef carver in a Goose Common shop, and making quite a bit besides taking bookie's slips. "And what sort of time have you bin having yourself, Sook?" asked Bert.

Sookey told him without frills what sort of time. The new Bert irritated her here. He seemed to take it for granted that she had had merely the sort of experience that a creature lacking his outstanding ability, or the guidance of that ability, must naturally have. He even said: "Wot need to go through it like that? Should have thought you'd had gumption enough to know I was home and would see you through."

"When did you stop knowing anything at all about me, Bert?" she asked scornfully. He stared and grinned suddenly.

"I get you. You'd ha' starved flat rather than take help from anyone like me. You're a stubborn little faggot, Sookey. All the same, don't come that sort o' game again. We're old friends. If any time—— Look here, if ever you want to set up in a little rag shop of your own, don't forget I'm ready to put up the dibs."

"What?" she gasped.

"I've got the cash," he said staunchly. "I can put it up."

"What's the matter with you, Bert?" she jeered after a stare. "You're not—*gone* on me?"

He examined her in his cool way: "You're a looker, I'll admit," he said slowly, "but no, not just yet. You'd keep me sweating under the collar for fear I said the wrong thing, or did it, or didn't. . . . My mark's more comfort than show. Why, that doctor chap's more your line as you look now."

For a reason mysterious even to herself Sookey flared: "That's kind of you, but I've got no use for you or the doctor chap, or any chap. I'm quite satisfied with myself as I am and my ability to stand on my own feet. I don't want any help, money or otherwise—just remember that, my lad. I'm going up to where I mean to go by my own wits and my own work, and one of these days you'll be glad to get an invitation to one of my swell affairs—even though it may make you sweat under your collar. You're not the only rocket in the sky, my friend."

"Fine," he said, calm and natural. "That's the old Sook all right. An' I believe you. You'll get anywhere you like with a kick in you like that. All the same, Sookey, I meant it decent. It's you being the little Lady Vere de Vere that made me put it rough. I'd like to play pal to you if ever you need it, an' if you ever do—why, the offer's always there."

Under his genuineness her anger faded as quickly as it had risen, she touched the hand on which the knuckles had already begun to lump and spread: "I know, Bert," she said, "you're a sportsman. And if I ever do need help there isn't anyone else I'd even think of coming to. Now I've got to cut back to my job."

"Where do you live? Are you by yourself?" he asked in his unshakable manner.

Sookey told him because she wanted to keep in with him, because also she wanted to awe him with her sitting-room. When he heard of Claudine he said: "That duck! I remember her. No end of a duchess, an' some looker too."

"You'd better come and make love to her, she adores strong, violent men," said Sookey, marvelling at the taste of the male.

There was no doubt about it, Bert thought quite a lot of Claudine and showed it from his first visit. He no doubt recognized her refinement as the novelette caricature that Cherry Pie Gardens considered the real thing; that is, he could admire it without being intimidated by it, as he was intimidated by Sookey's new manner. Also the coy Claudine's giggling timidity before his strength and his wealth and his notoriety was a triumph to his vanity. It stimulated his pride to impress her and at the same time feel that his admirer was "the real lady."

Sookey was amused, perhaps a little piqued too, that Bert should succumb to the faked article while something nearer the true flavour of good breeding was on show in herself. Their first meeting in the sitting-room, when Claudine was too horribly ladylike for mere human nature, and Bert was solemnly and painfully the perfect gentleman as Cherry Pie Gardens visualized the breed, was droll where it was not exasperating.

Exasperating because it was plain that Claudine had found an ally to back her taste against Sookey's. Bert did not like her sitting-room. He did not think it homely. To show his idea of what a sitting-room ought to be he described his mother's room at Sidcup. Claudine nearly wriggled herself off her chair in ecstasies of cooing agreement as Bert talked with Marcus Stone rapture of potted palms and antimacassars. Bert did not agree with Sookey's ideals in dress either. As a man who stood up four-fifths naked in the ring, he was

shocked at woman's desire to expose more and more of herself. Woman blurred and disguised in a cocoon of laces, flounces and superabundant petticoats was the woman for Bert, and Claudine almost dislocated her glottis in purring agreement to every word that fell from his lips.

"How you would have loved Mrs. Noah," Sookey snapped tartly, "and how Mother Eve would have shocked you."

"We're sivvilized since then," said Bert in his calm, lordy way. And Claudine echoed: "Yes, civilized. Mister Tavener is quait right. We women have changed for the better since then."

But whether since Eve or Mrs. Noah neither said.

Sookey came quickly to feel that Bert was a very good fellow but rather hard to bear; that Claudine was nothing of the sort and quite unbearable. She grew more certain under both heads every day.

Bert called regularly and the charms of the breast-bony Claudine were the reason. He was not courting Claudine, he was not courting anybody until he was champion—the Irishman unsentimental in marriage saw to that—but he certainly flirted with the girl in his calm and quite unsexual way. They began to try Sookey's nerves. In addition to giggling, glad-eyeing and bright talk, there was a certain amount of horse-play. Bert had noted that exhibitions of muscular strength lifted Claudine to high-pressure adulation. She screamed deliciously if he caught her thin arm and forced her back into a chair she pretended to vacate for him with the mere pressure of his powerful wrist. She liked to snatch things away from him so that he would struggle to get them back, and hold her helpless with the grip of one hand while he did it. All this was an old game of Cherry Pie Gardens—perhaps a game as old as the Stone Age—and Bert and Claudine were quite at home in it.

But Sookey loathed it.

Sookey loathed it the more because it stimulated Claudine's always overpowering vanity and made life, even apart from the visits of Bert, insupportable. Claudine took to buying the dresses she and Bert liked and Sookey hated. She would wear clothes that committed assault and battery on the colour scheme of their sitting-room, and, emboldened by the interest of Bert, she set herself deliberately to counter every opinion Sookey held.

She countered them on the grounds of refinement and taste, and she did it exasperatingly by dragging in her lady of title. Lady Poppy would have arranged that part of the room this way. Lady Poppy always said her words that way. Lady Poppy, after all, was a better judge of good manners than a mere shop girl. Lady Poppy became a nightmare—Lady Poppy so definitely supported all Claudine's excesses. Lady Poppy had commended Claudine for her exquisite discrimination. Lady Poppy had told her how much she relied upon her, how her work was really at the bottom of "Poppée's" growing reputation.

Sookey felt she was being bludgeoned to death by Lady Poppy. She loathed the creature. She wondered what sort of old frump this Lady Poppy was that she should so favour and, indeed, gain success through such a second-rate article as Claudine. She told herself many times that she must go and look at "Poppée's" window to see what deadly dowager garments were exhibited there. That she did not do it was due partly to her contempt for Claudine's ability, partly to the fact that the copying of dresses in the big West End streets kept her too busy to branch off into side-roads for a glimpse of the worthless.

When Claudine and her Lady Poppy became more than she could bear she would snap:

"Oh, damn your Lady Poppy! Must you do even your thinking second-hand, Claudine?"

"I was merely drawing your attention to the fact that *some*one rather more exalted than the Old Kent Road has a good opinion of my taste and ability," Claudine answered with the dignity of a sulky cat.

The Old Kent Road—that taunt was coming up again. Sookey's dark eyes flashed, her piquant beauty became wicked.

"And why should this Lady Poppy know better than the Old Kent Road?" she demanded ominously.

"A lady of the highest *so*siety naturally knows more about refeenment——"

Sookey snorted.

"You, of course, may not think so," said Claudine glacially.

"I don't," snapped Sookey; and as Claudine gave her superior, pitying smile, "You see, she thinks a lot of you. What is more, since she thinks so much of you, it seems to me that you had better go and live with her. Or if you are too refeened even for her, as near her as you can." Claudine paled and gasped. "Anyway, it's time you went somewhere where my opinions and presence can't upset you."

Claudine climbed down at once. Every time Sookey brought the matter as far as that and waited for a fiery retort in kind, the fiery retort never came. Claudine cringed and wept and gave way all along the line.

It was a curious phenomenon. Just a threat of parting and Claudine came tumbling down from whatever Mount Everest of superiority she was perched on into a veritable quag of sticky humility. Sookey could not understand it. Why should a hint of a break turn Claudine into a whipped puppy ready to do anything to prevent a parting? It was not affection. Claudine disliked her, felt a contempt for her, was read to show it when her queer, unbalanced vanity got the better of her humility, as it always did. No, Sookey could not understand the girl's clinging, except that perhaps

feeble natures like Claudine's naturally had to cling to a stronger will despite their hostility.

She felt this for a long time and anxiously, for she wondered if she'd ever be able to throw the girl off when it really did come to the point. It was only by overhearing Claudine say to Bert Tavener: "No, I can't go out with you to-night, Bert, *neither* of us can. There's something very particular me and Sookey has to do. Very particular, see! Don't you try and get Sookey to go out either, an' don't you stay. It's most important."

Sookey, who was coming up the stairs quietly, heard Claudine speaking through the open door of their sitting-room. She stopped on the stairs trying to remember what this "particular" thing was she had to do. She couldn't remember. She had not arranged anything with Claudine or anybody else for this evening. Yet Claudine had something in view, and from the anxiety in her voice and her determination to get Bert out of the way it meant a great deal to Claudine.

Sookey spent the evening in a condition of great alertness. She waited and waited for Claudine to disclose this important "something," but Claudine was very slow about it. They had their high tea. They talked, they performed a dozen trifles, still no approach to the matter of moment. Claudine got out her fabrics and materials and began to talk design as though she had no intention whatsoever of coming to the point. Sookey was angered by her methods. She sat herself obstinately in a chair with a book, refused to be led astray by clothes. Claudine would *have* to come to the point.

And then quite suddenly Sookey realized that the "particular" thing was dress design, that this matter of clothes which Claudine was trying to draw her into discussing was the business of vital importance that was to keep them aloof that night. After each of her curt grunts from behind her book, Claudine's anxiety became more pronounced. Claudine

was exerting every effort she was capable of to make her talk dress. Sookey stopped reading to listen to the really extraordinary anxiety in Claudine's voice. Claudine was treating this gossip about styles as a life and death matter.

Quite suddenly something seemed to go still within Sookey. She understood. She seemed to hang suspended in a blinding light of revelation for a long time, while Claudine's voice whined and pleaded, coaxed and teased. Then she put the matter to the test.

She rose abruptly, went to the door, faced Claudine with her steady, searching eyes, said grimly:

"If you can't stop talking I'll read in my room. As for giving you an opinion on dress I've had all I want of your views on my taste. I've finished. You and I are never going to talk dress any more."

She stared at Claudine callously. She saw horror, an utter collapse of fear in that face—and she knew why Claudine did not want to break with her.

She went to her room, but not to read. She went to the drawer of her dressing-table where she kept all the dress designs she had created in her discussions with Claudine. There ought to be about twenty. There were two. Two drawings on top—eighteen blank pieces of paper beneath to take the place of eighteen stolen.

She locked her door, for she knew that a weeping Claudine might appear any moment. Claudine did try the handle, but Sookey paid no attention.

Of course, she ought to have seen the whole of the trick from the beginning, seen even how it linked up with the Claudine of the Old Kent Road.

She ought to have seen that Claudine's early dissatisfaction with "Poppée's" like her one-time dissatisfaction with her "peeple" arose from the fact that Claudine was a dud. She had no ability save her skill in sewing—and filching other

people's ideas, and "Poppée's" and her "peeple" of old had seen that. She was old-fashioned, unimaginative, hopeless as a designer, and knew that dismissal always hovered over her head.

Of course, she had saved herself by picking Sookey's brains. Sookey could recall how she had suddenly got on with her "peeple" in the old days—after she had begun to discuss dress designs with Sookey. When Sookey had gone out of her life, she had sunk back to mediocrity—that was why she had been so anxious to live with her again. And once they had come together again the whole process had been repeated. Claudine's anxiety about her position at "Poppée's" vanished after their discussions about dress. Then after those discussions Claudine had risen in the estimation of "Poppée's" and, by Jove, her rise in salary as she had got that raise in salary in the Old Kent Road. . . . Claudine had not mentioned the raise this time—she had been able to resist her vanity there—but Sookey suddenly visualized all the dresses and shoes and stockings Claudine had been buying lately, and knew that they must mean more pay from "Poppée's."

"The dam' girl has been setting my teeth on edge with money got through *me*," Sookey cried. "And all that reputation for taste she's been flinging at me was earned by *me*."

Cherry Pie Gardens nearly burst its way through at that moment, and Claudine was in very grave danger of being treated as Alf Naylor had once been treated.

But the old Sookey could always hold herself in hand, and the new Sookey could do it better. She went on thinking.

Claudine had picked her brains for months, had built up the whole of her reputation in that way. Latterly, however, there had been few opportunities for stealing. Claudine's preoccupation with Bert, Sookey's growing distaste for Claudine's company, had curtailed the discussions of frocks. She could recall that there had been several evenings

when Claudine had tried to entangle her in such discussions, and the girl's pettishness when she had refused. Claudine's inspiration in taste, then, must have been running pretty thin of late, and that, no doubt, was why she had run the risk of stealing the drawings. And she had run through the drawings, that was why she had made her particular effort to get Sookey to talk to-night.

Sookey went that night without sleeping. Not that she had to think out the future; she thought it out and made up her mind less than half an hour after leaving Claudine. She did not sleep because she was packing her things.

By six o'clock she was packed, and she went out to an early breakfast before Claudine was up. Between breakfast and the time for reaching her work she took a bedroom and sitting-room in that vast enigmatic district called Kensington.

At Claudine's lunch-time she went into Kedley Street to look at "Poppée's." Three of the dresses she had designed formed the sole attractions in "Poppée's" window. Obvious whose work was building up the growing reputation of "Poppée's." Sookey paused only long enough to realize that her designs came out even better when made up, and then went back to her work.

She was the first home that evening; that gave her time to interview the landlady. When Claudine and Bert came in, she was lifting certain small pieces of furniture into one corner, and taking down those hangings and pictures she valued.

Claudine had probably brought Bert in to fend off the crisis she felt was impending, or at least to give her moral backing, but the sight of Sookey's work left her limp and pale. Sookey said to her calmly: "I've given notice to the landlady, and paid her my share of two weeks' rent ahead. I am leaving in half an hour."

Claudine gulped and stared. Bert said easily:

"What's your game, Sookey? You're making this room look pretty ugly anyhow."

Claudine bleated feebly: "It's spiteful of you, Sookey, and—and I paid for some of this furniture."

"Oh, it's not to your taste," said Sookey. "Also if you insist on keeping it I'll insist on your returning me the eighteen dress designs you took from my dressing-table drawer."

Claudine sat down and began to cry. "Bert! Bert!" she whimpered. "Stop her. . . ."

But the matter of stolen drawings had interested Bert. Cool as ever, he looked at Sookey: "What's this about the drawings, Sook?"

"She stole them, Bert," said Sookey evenly. "She's been stealing my ideas for dresses and palming them off as her own ever since we've been together. That's why she came to live with me. I found it out last night. That was the particular thing she wanted me to talk to her about. . . . She wanted to pump me for more ideas."

"It's a lie, it's a low, vulgar lie," cried Claudine on a scream. "Bert, you know it's a lie."

"Sookey don't lie," said Bert calmly.

"Besides, we can soon prove it by seeing how long you remain with 'Poppée's' as the mainstay of their growing reputation," said Sookey.

"Sookey," cried Claudine, "you can't be so cruel." She flung herself on her knees before Sookey and grovelled. She was grovelling when a cart came up to take away Sookey's furniture; then the sight of the men who came up for it drove her to her bedroom.

As the pieces were carried down Bert said: "I'll call a taxi, Sook, an' see you in—if having a thick-headed chump about you don't make you sore."

CHAPTER XXVI

In six months Sookey Lee or, as she called herself, Sue Lee, was the reason why "Poppée's" had gained its great reputation.

Sookey had not found her chance; she had made it.

She had watched "Poppée's."

In a week the smart frocks from designs stolen by Claudine had gone from the window. Frocks of less attractive quality took their place—and remained stolidly and immovably in their place.

On the fourth Monday after their parting, Claudine was not among the hands who left "Poppée's" at closing time. On Tuesday, just before closing time, Sookey entered "Poppée's" and demanded to see Lady Poppy.

She even detached Lady Poppy from an absorbing conversation with a young man who seemed to have stood as model for all the best pictures of handsome Vikings.

Lady Poppy had a plump arrogance of charm until she realized that Sookey was in some way connected with the brilliant frock designs that had, alack! ceased to adorn "Poppée's" exclusive window. She said, with a sudden tightening of eyes, lips, and even nostrils: "But those designs were the work of a Miss Atherell, who, unfortunately, found she could not go on with them owing to bad health."

"I'm the bad health," said Sookey. "I stopped supplying her."

The Viking young man laughed with a sudden genial crack. Lady Poppy's face tightened up a little more, but she said with interest: "You are hinting that you are connected in some way with those designs?"

"I'm not hinting; they were my designs. She stole them from me. I can give you proof."

"That would certainly be necessary," said Lady Poppy, wondering if this was to be a demand for compensation or a heaven-sent find. Sookey produced a pad and a pencil; she drew a costume and coloured it with crayons. She had come ready for just this gesture; she had elaborated a new dress design the night before.

"Yes, a sweet dress, a striking design," said Lady Poppy. "It might be a copy, of course."

"You can recognize my style of drawing, though," said Sookey.

"Pinned you, Poppy," said the Viking, who was not only interested but seemed to have the right to be interested. "Darn good drawing, too."

"What do you expect me to do, Miss——?" asked the more shrewd Lady Poppy.

"Sue Lee is my name," said Sookey. ("Oh, jolly good," said the Viking.) "I have other designs like this at home, and I am open to take a post as designer."

"And you think you'd suit us?" said Lady Poppy in her best off-hand style.

"You—or somebody else," said Sookey coolly. "But as my work has made something of a reputation here already——"

Again the crack of the Viking spoilt the dignity of the proceedings. "Come to terms, Poppy," the tall young man said. "You know you've got to have her. Perhaps you could put a figure to it, Miss Sue Lee?"

Sookey could and did—promptly: a fine fixed salary, a fine fixed percentage on the price of every design. She had learnt something about shops. She knew that "Poppée's" did not put prices on their models because price was a matter relying

entirely on the assessment of the customer's purse and desire, and she meant to get her full value out of any price.

Lady Poppy pretended to think, perhaps even thought, the terms were outrageous; they were stiff enough, but something about Sookey's cool assurance seemed to have won the young man.

"Aw, don't haggle, Poppy," he cried. "You know you must have her, you know you've been crying your eyes out for more of those designs. . . . Here's a chance sent from heaven. Grab it hard."

Lady Poppy grabbed it, if not too vigorously, yet firmly. Sookey, with a stamped agreement (Bert was the inspiration of that) worth, she thought, anything up to £1,000 a year, started to make "Poppée's" and herself.

She was wrong about the thousand a year. She made half as much again by the end of the six months. The gloriously fluctuating price of smart gowns was mainly responsible. Frocks that had cost but a few shillings and a little brain-work went at any price from twenty-five guineas upward. Lady Poppy was a charmingly unscrupulous saleswoman who neglected no art of her own and weakness in her customer to extract the maximum the purse could afford.

Sookey found that she herself was a very good second in salesmanship and Lady Poppy's superior in art and taste.

She had been right in telling Claudine that she had been born to teach Lady Poppy and her kind taste. Lady Poppy certainly had some—it had decided her that she was just the person to open a shop—but most of her customers were almost startlingly devoid of it. The number of well nurtured and cultured women who had not the slightest idea how to dress themselves, and who placed themselves in Sookey's hands like dull, gilded sheep was astonishing. Sookey, whose first batch of sharp, novel, brilliant and startling frocks seemed to bring

all Lady Poppy's friends rushing to the shop—and Lady Poppy counted on her friends—soon found that her gifts were forced into a new, more absorbing and, for "Poppée's," more valuable phase. She began to design on "the living model," as Mr. Dudo had done, building up schemes of line and colour on the bodies of customers to suit (and sometimes to accommodate) their hair, skin, contour or lack of it, and height.

It began by her attempts to head off women from buying dresses that were unsuitable to the state of complexion and figure to which nature and art had brought them. This gained her a great reputation for honesty, but caused Lady Poppy a great deal of anxiety. One day, when the notorious outline of Lady Gundred Marrl became filled with an atrocious desire for a simple frock in white and green and gold that demanded a reincarnation of Psyche, Lady Poppy was almost in despair—for if Lady Gundred was distended so was her purse. So was Lady Gundred, she said: "What does it matter? Nothing ever made will suit me, and if I buy that frock there'll be something pretty about me at least."

Sookey said evenly: "Nobody has troubled about you, madam. If you will come into the fitting-room, if you can give me an hour, and if you don't object to my designing on you, I think I can give you something worth while."

Sookey did. She found just the rich, sombre tones that went with Lady Gundred's massy figure. In less than that hour she had changed her from an heroic bolster into a Boadicea dressed to prove to Roman governor-generals that queens could be bred in Britain. The delightful effect on Lady Gundred and her purse was nothing to the reaction caused by the public sight of Lady Gundred looking positively female. Other women were overpowered by the desire to be reconstructed so admirably, and it became the thing to go to "Poppée's" and put oneself entirely in the hands of "that wonderful Sue Lee."

"I never have to think for myself," said more than one title. "I deliver myself over to Sue Lee from shoes to hat. Even my jewels are under her advice. She not merely never fails, she's marvellous. I'm getting her to do me a dozen frocks to suit my morning and evening complexions."

Lady Poppy's smart friends were the foundation of the craze, naturally, but it soon spread beyond them with the strange rapidity of a new fashion. It became almost a function of the Season to be taken over by Sue Lee and have one's exterior appearance schemed in piece. The prices were stiff, very stiff, and the stiffer they were the more glad the victims seemed to pay. Those who could not stand the racket had to fall back on the stock frocks that Sookey designed, and as she had less and less time for these their prices advanced with their rarity.

But whether you bought your costume ready-made, or whether you had it made on your shrinking figure you asked for Sue Lee. "You must see Sue Lee herself," became a watchword and a guarantee that you would get strictly candid treatment—that was Sookey's reputation.

You went to "Poppée's," and if you knew Lady Poppy or she happened to be there, you had a word with her and then you asked for Sue Lee. Sometimes you saw her at your first visit and you knew that you had committed a miracle; but you were generally lucky if you could bring away an appointment for to-morrow week.

Lady Poppy was seen less and less as the fame of her shop grew. She was content enough to leave things to Sookey and her four assistants, the hand-picked saleswoman and the efficient bookkeeper. She came two or three times a week to make a most efficient survey of the books and to study the appointments in order to tell the saleswoman how much she must charge.

Lady Poppy Craryn was not one of those ladies of title

who have a genius for frocks and who go into shopkeeping because they can really do good work there. Lady Poppy's motive was partly cash, partly the fact that at that time for a title to keep a shop was an astounding, piquant and attention-arresting thing. She had followed the trade of arresting attention all her life from the moment of her carefully stage-managed wedding (at nineteen) with a nobleman of whom it was suspected that in bringing down his first wife instead of a partridge there was more than a trifle of carelessness behind his trigger-finger. Always in debt, always avid of sensation, Lady Poppy had attempted many things, but nothing so profitable as this sensation caused by Sue Lee. She was therefore content to leave things to Sue Lee while she went about to gather the notoriety. She went everywhere. Few editors could evade the photographs of "Lady Poppy Craryn, who is, of course, better known as 'Poppée' . . ." in the dresses of all functions.

She went about with Lord Mariven, the Viking young man. It might almost be said that she went about with him to save him spending too much time in the vitiated atmosphere of her shop. Lord Mariven, who had a financial share in "Poppée's," had shown a very keen and attentive interest in its affairs of late, an interest which had not been so apparent before Sue Lee came along and set it on its feet.

Perhaps Lady Poppy's intention was to keep the large young man away from Sue Lee. In that she failed. Lord Mariven had a strange habit of forgetting exactly where he had arranged to meet her on days of engagements. He would drive up in his big car and lounge into the shop and ask if Lady Poppy was about and was she ready. It was only often ten, fifteen, thirty minutes that he said to Sookey, "Good Lord! I remember now, I was to pick her up at her flat." His crack of laughter would come. "Don't matter, though; Poppy's always late—and so'm I."

It was always to Sookey he said this. Whoever was in the shop, whatever Sookey was doing, he always managed to talk to her. Sookey was under no illusion about his forgetfulness, nor was she disturbed by the motive underneath it. Lord Mariven came in to see her, and she did not dislike it.

With his big, blond beauty he was quite the most handsome man she had ever met. He was genial and good company. Spoilt and undisciplined underneath, he carried it off, as an acquaintance, with a certain air of jolly arrogance that seemed to go well with the fact that he had always had too much money and too much title. And his interest flattered as much as charmed her. Not only did he treat her as one on his own footing, which confirmed her opinion that she was quite capable of holding her own in his social sphere, but he also seemed to think she was of his class. "Do I know any of your folk?" he said once. "'Pon my honour your face has always seemed deuced familiar. I've met someone —or ones, don't you know—like you, where?"

Sookey thought of him meeting old Sookey and the other nobility of Cherry Pie Gardens, and did not know whether to shudder or giggle. And yet there was that in his words that recalled all the hints about the mystery of her birth. She seriously wondered if she had been a changeling child—if she was the lost member of some family who moved in Lord Mariven's sphere.

She wondered if one day the truth would come out. It would be the crown of her triumph if it did. She felt she was already making good her boasts. She was in with these people of the glittering world. She was, she felt, one of them as though she belonged. The old Sookey of Cherry Pie Gardens had utterly vanished in the tall, individual, distinctive beauty who so slimly, gracefully and aloofly faced her in the long mirrors of her fitting-room. The last taint of Cherry Pie Gardens had been submerged by the composure,

the culture, the reserve and the diction with which she met her clients on level terms. And those clients were showing that they felt she was of their own type by their eagerness to take her about. She was not "on top of them," as Bert desired to be; she was inside with them, which was much more important. To be able to prove by birth that she was their equal . . . the equal of none other than Lord Mariven would be to complete her position.

CHAPTER XXVII

Sookey became a celebrity. In the swift and febrile way of that world of fashion she leapt from nothingness to fame in a few weeks. There was no transition period. In a world in which the news of a new star can flash through half a dozen receptions and balls in the course of an evening, where people would rather go bankrupt than be out of the latest thing, her fame passed through the compact corporation that makes what is loosely known as the Smart Set in the course of a few days only.

Sookey passed from a work girl to intimacy with the fringes of society at once, and she found few embarrassments in the change. One so adaptive and observant found little difficulty with the minor tricks of conduct; one so individual could carry off any slips with an air of indifference; and in any case her instinct for the right thing seemed unerring.

Her success was deserved, too, because she had an undoubted genius for the application of colour to life. Her frock designs had an individuality, a novelty, a shock, and the world that had taken her up could at least appreciate beauty and novelty.

Sookey's new note in the then drastically changing fashion of the line and colour of costume was decisive. And she was proving, as Bede O'Gara had foreseen she would, that her sense of values in decoration was not limited to clothing. She was one of the first to show that the power of a shop window depended less on quantity than quality. Each week "Poppée's" window became a jewel of tonal beauty in which one perfect frock glowed alone amid a severe and exquisite surrounding of appropriate tints. And each week more

shopkeepers saw that the method was good and imitated.

She carried this sense of decoration into the shop itself, into the reception rooms. She modelled them in bold, flawless colours bravely or simply as their nature demanded. She eliminated all redundant and spurious decoration, depending on pure colour and line and the strong sharp effect of a few decorative pieces—a glowing rug, a flash of bright silk, a great Chinese vase of black, or crackled turquoise glaze, or *sang de bœuf*—for her results. Those reception rooms became show places—and places of envy. A multi-millionairess on the startle saw the value of them as a force to compel attention in her direction. She said, as Sookey designed the thirtieth frock in her order: "I'm sure you must always feel that your costumes would look to even better advantage, Miss Lee, if you could only design the natural background for them as well."

"That would be ideal, of course," said Sookey, wondering how on earth she was going to find yet another combination to suit a figure not as glorious as its income.

"And you designed these rooms?" asked the woman.

"Yes; I designed them. If you'll kindly stand still . . ."

"Come and design my rooms then," said the other. "I'm just moving into my house in Carlton House Terrace—this is your opportunity for proving your ideal."

Sookey planned those rooms. She wanted to, and also the multi-millionairess's banking account was a thing that could not be denied. The multi-millionairess was out for fame. She knew the value of unique rooms. She knew the value of coupling herself with the fashionable "Poppée"; she knew the value of saying startlingly: "I've got that wonderful Sue Lee to design rooms to match my frocks. . . ." It had a superb shock to the mind; it was like building a house to match one's complexion. . . . People talked, papers photographed the rooms; everybody who admired or abominated the million-

airess flocked to the house-warming. Even the foods on the buffets toned with the scheme. Sookey, who appreciated the value of extravagance, had fallen in with that idea too. The rooms gave Sue Lee and "Poppée's" a newer, more expensive, vogue.

People asked Sookey out because of this vogue. They asked her because she was the latest toy; they asked her in the hope of catching to themselves some of the glitter that surrounded her; they asked her in the hope that their social position might persuade her to give them hints about frocks and room decoration and so enable them to be in the latest craze without having to pay Lady Poppy's "really scandalous prices"; they asked her because they were jealous of the way Lady Poppy had "got away" with her new sensation, and they hoped to lure Sookey from her, both to strike a blow at Lady Poppy and to gain notoriety for themselves as the protectors and encouragers of art. They invited her for scores of dubious reasons, and since her native shrewdness had not been submerged by her success, she saw through their subterfuges and found herself experiencing quite the same disgust as she had experienced for the citizens of Cherry Pie Gardens; in fact she saw that with quite a number of these people the only difference from Cherry Pie Gardens was a coat of social varnish.

At the same time there were people who invited her because they liked her, because of her individuality and freshness; because of her sharp beauty and her quick and candid intelligence; because of her charm and achievement. Lady Poppy did not invite her out, because Lady Poppy had always treated her as a hired shop hand, and, as time went on and Sookey's earnings grew to an astonishing bulk, seemed more and more anxious to insist on the shop-girl basis. Lord Mariven did not introduce her into the intimacy of his own circle either, partly, perhaps, because of Lady Poppy, partly

because his set was the exclusive body within the great hotch-potch of smart life that surrounded it.

Nevertheless Sookey went from one vast function to another, from one great house to another, to race meetings and to river houses, to dances and with glittering parties in sleek cars to shining theatres, and she stood under the lights at the entrances of the theatres as she had promised she should, and little crowds of Berts and Sookeys watched her preen herself before walking daintily like a shining bird into the foyer—as she and Bert had once watched others walk into a foyer.

All the thrills and glamours, the arrogance and delight she had dreamed were hers, and she gloried in and enjoyed every glamour and thrill as she had expected she would. It was a triumph to be with these lords of the earth. It was a triumph to be marked out among them, to hear voices say, "That's Sue Lee," to see heads turned towards her, to know that the women were talking about her as a celebrity and planning how to get to know her, to know that every day would bring to the small flat she had taken near Buckingham Gate more invitations than she could accept. Even the women who tried to make use of her were paying tribute to her. It was all heady and wonderful, and she was part of it; she had attained wealth, success and power as she knew she would.

She was not aware that Paul Geneste mixed with this world until she heard his voice in her ear at a reception in a great house in one of the turnings off Park Lane.

"So you've arrived, Sue Lee," she heard him say. "You see even I cannot escape your fame. You've climbed into your gorgeous material heaven—and, by Jove, you look a natural part of it too. . . . Well, is it up to your dream standard?"

His rough-hewn ugliness was more marked than ever among a gathering so carefully well-ironed that even the faces seemed hot pressed into perfection. Either this gave

him a more definite air of reticent power, or he had developed it. She remembered how the O'Garas had said that his was the type that stood out and attracted, and she could see that more than ever now. She herself experienced a curious, deep thrill at the sight of him. She caught the eyes of more than one woman on him, knew that more than one was saying: "Who's the interesting man with Sue Lee?" But she saw that Paul was aware of this too, and, with a little shock, realized that he did not dislike it.

She was surprised how actively she resented Paul's liking it, she who thought such admiration was the thing most worth while; but she did resent it in Paul; she expected another attitude from him, and she resented, too, the fact that he was extremely well turned out, that there was a certain urbanity in his curtness, that there was a polish about him.

"How did you get here, Paul?" she asked. "You don't mind the Paul?"

"Surely it gives me an advantage?" he smiled, and his glance indicated several women ready to pounce and gush. "And I can retort with Sue?"

"Not Sookey?" His adroitness had jarred on her.

"I wouldn't dare," he laughed, and again she was not pleased. She said:

"How did you get here?"

"By determination. By aiming to get to you whatever tide of silk tried to draw me aside—and getting here."

"You've caught their patter," she said impatiently.

"That sounds disillusioned. Isn't all this up to advertisement, Sue?" He said it almost eagerly, as though he expected her agreement.

"I love it," she said almost fiercely. "I told you I would, and it's true. To be part of all this is to be part of the only life worth living."

"*No* disillusionments, then?" he said almost regretfully.

"And you?" she asked.

"Oh, I never had illusions," he said grimly.

"You find it as bad as that?"

They stared over the shifting mass that looked like a parcel of extravagant jewels dumped unhandily and uncomfortably into a jewel box that did not match and was far too small.

"Look at this crowd," said Paul with a short, grim laugh. "I don't suppose there is one in twenty who hasn't the profoundest contempt for our host. . . . Why, already five men of the highest repute have told me the latest story about the man. I daresay you've heard it. It's the one about his having escaped imprisonment for forgery in some South American state by sharing half his loot with the Public Prosecutor. The last man who told me tried to draw me to the buffet, presumably because the scandal gained an additional flavour through sipping our victim's champagne."

"Oh, people disappoint at times—an individual here and there," said Sookey loftily. Hadn't she felt that herself?

"You could pick a double handful of disappointment with every cast," said Paul. "Look at them, all feverish, greedy, eager to take what they can get without a moral twinge. They more than suspect our host is a scoundrel; most of them here are telling each other that; and yet they swallow his reputation for the sake of the cash he controls, the champagne he provides, and the company he can attract. They're the people who must be 'in' everything. And what a company! There's Lady Phagocyte, who would have spent most of her existence in the ducking stool of the old days because of her total inability to distinguish other women's husbands from her own. That little group of enamelled virgins talking together over there—— But I see you know about that little club of theirs. . . ."

"I've lunched with most of them one time or another," said Sookey quickly.

"And heard them talk. It would make Cherry Pie Gardens blush, eh? Well, their hobby does not bear mentioning by any but really smart people. The big man who looks like a dean who took the wrong turning and found himself on the halls instead of in a pulpit, is Brahn. His name on a company prospectus is considered *the* perfect guarantee of bad faith—to those in the know, not shareholders, naturally. That stout pillar of diamonds by night is the finest private blackmailer in Europe. The youngster who looks as if there must have been a Buff Orpington in his ancestry is gifted with a stillborn intelligence, but no duke living can invent such brilliant house-party rags, and he will undoubtedly go far in his chosen career—Foreign Affairs. The sullen stoat by that window is heir to one of our proudest titles; his claim to the admiration of his kind is the brilliance with which he arranged with a rascally firm of private detectives the downfall of the perfectly chaste woman who had the misfortune to be his wife. His divorce cost him a good deal of money, but he will get more than a fair return, for he is marrying the daughter of a millionaire—just out of a convent. What a crew." He stopped, then he said startlingly: "It's Cherry Pie Gardens all over again, isn't it?—only in silver gilt."

She stared, frowning to keep back her surprise at the way his thoughts marched with some of her own.

"You compare this with Cherry Pie?" she demanded, her hand indicating the high, shrill, splendid glitter.

"Why not? There's not much difference in the bulk of human beings, the veneer only differs, and that's about all."

"We're not all rotten," she protested.

"Oh, lord, no!" The general mass of mankind, just as the general mass of vegetation, may be weeds—but there are flowers and good timber too. This produces sterling people just as Cherry Pie Gardens produced you, Sookey, and that decent chap, Bert Tavener. . . . I suppose it's only natural.

The bulk must be useless; only the few count in the world."

"I notice you didn't count yourself," she smiled.

"Oh, leave me out of the elect," he said with a sudden, withdrawing savagery; and Sookey wondered why he hated himself. She said:

"You seem to know a lot about these people, Paul?"

"A first-rate second-hand knowledge," he laughed. "I'm rather intimate with Charles Socian."

"The Harley Street man?" she said, looking at him quickly.

"That's the man. He brought me here, as a matter of fact."

"And the research work?" she demanded, her eyes all attention.

"Well, I'm still doing it at least," he said grimly. "Ploughing a lonely furrow at the hospital."

"And it remains the only ambition worth while?"

"It's the only *work* worth while whatever one says," he said doggedly. "For the man who really has it in him it is real work, noble work. But if . . . Well, what would you say to a man who gave it up for this, Sookey?"

He indicated the smart crowd before them, and he seemed to be begging an answer. And though she knew the exact answer for herself, she could not give him one. She said, knowing she was begging the question:

"Don't ask me, Paul. I like all this; it's in my system; but then I'm a material little baggage."

He laughed at her retort, and they talked about her work until Lord Mariven unexpectedly appeared and made his way towards her. Paul Geneste, catching the direction of her eyes, asked: "Who's the Norse giant who seems to know you, Sookey?" And when Sookey answered, he frowned and said: "That fellow—didn't know he mixed with this lot, or anyone outside his own set, but——" He checked, and said: "Know him well, Sookey?"

"Very well," said Sookey, not without elation. She knew it was unusual to find Lord Mariven at this sort of function, and she could not help realizing that his presence here was not unconnected with her own. She smiled and took his hand, and turned to introduce him to Paul, but already Paul had vanished out of sight beneath the sea of silk that broke into a spray of feathers and jewels.

"Who's the village Hampden?" asked Lord Mariven; and on learning, said: "Oh, a doctor chap!" And the tone dismissed Paul and his significance for ever.

"I say," he went on, "I had an idea I heard Poppy say she was to be here. Have I bungled it again? Was it you who said it?"

"I've never felt like a bungle before," said Sookey, "and it doesn't feel an over-complimented sort of animal."

"What an ass I am in the way I put things," he said, with his genial crack of a laugh. "Only shows you though, don't it, that I'm rapidly developing an ear that only listens when you speak, Sue? . . . You look an absolute duck in that frock. . . . Come along and drink some of this bounder's silver-gilt champagne. I don't know what his name is, but I'm told his caterer is first-class."

Sookey winced as he said that. It was an echo of Paul's talk, and one of Lord Mariven's position, pleasantness and extreme good looks ought to be above that sort of thing. However, his pleasantness and good looks soon made her forget about Paul and most other things.

It was only when leaving the house that she saw Paul again. He was with Sir Charles Socian, and both men were surrounded by women. All the women had eyes only for Paul. . . . Yes, he certainly had a strange attraction for women, and, what was more, was showing that he was aware of it.

Sir Charles Socian, Sookey knew, was the darling of the smart set. He was getting on in years, and inclined to take

things easier. She had heard that he might retire or take a partner, and she wondered whether his friendship for Paul had any connexion with that rumour.

If it did, then Paul's research work was threatened, and she was suddenly angry at the mere idea, without even knowing why she should be angry.

CHAPTER XXVIII

She saw a good deal of Paul after that. They met at several functions; she saw him at a race meeting that Max—Lord Mariven, but Max on his own insistence—took her to in the absence of Lady Poppy in Venice.

At one of these functions she teased him on his sudden affection for the gay and material life.

"Oh, the proper study of mankind is man," he smiled back at her.

"But you don't want the article in bulk, when all you need is a microscopic section or two happy in germs."

"You seem to harp a good deal on germs, Sookey," he said, with a queer look.

"Perhaps you notice it more because you are showing a tendency to ignore them," she said.

He looked at her sharply.

"I say, my dear, you seem to have opinions on the matter. We must thrash this out." Again he seemed eager. "It would do me good. Besides being a really remarkable creature, Sookey, you have a very satisfying way of bringing matters down to fundamentals."

"My fundamentals," she said, warning him off—how strange that she should do it!—"are those of a materially-minded little baggage. I glory in all this. My gospel is that of the world, the flesh and the financier."

"There's something to be said for that side," he answered evenly, and she looked at him closely.

"This sounds like the beginning of a debate," she said, not quite cheerfully. "You had better come to tea with me one Saturday or Sunday. . . . Telephone first."

Paul Geneste did telephone, but not to discuss things. He had something more remarkable for her.

It was on a Saturday afternoon, and he took her first to the Royal Academy, then in the closing weeks of the spring exhibition. Sookey, who had been there already to be seen and to see frocks, was startled to find that these were pictures worth looking at too, and that it could be restful. It was inhabited entirely by a few determined people who knew that the pictures were there to be looked at, and a few bewildered and tenacious suburbans who felt that the pictures *must* be looked at if they were to save their souls and their reputations for being first in culture in Thornton Heath.

Paul took her straight through the rooms to one picture, which Sookey had not seen on her first visit. He said nothing, but looked at her, waiting for a reaction. Sookey stood in front of it, wondering what sort of riddle she was expected to solve. She looked at the catalogue. It was a portrait of Miriam Gerin, the niece of Lord Fulking; the latter name seemed familiar, but gave her no clue.

"She's very good looking," she said, "badly painted, not too well dressed, and somehow familiar."

"You *do* recognize the face," said Paul.

"I don't," she said. "I don't know her, but I seem to have met her somewhere."

"Well, she is rather badly painted," said Paul. "And not a true Gerin at that. Come along, I'll show you a better specimen."

They taxied to the National Portrait Gallery, that temple of idealized physiognomy which seems to be entered only by people of severest sociological opinions. Again Paul led her straight to a picture, the picture of a woman painted with all the dash of Gainsborough. It was the portrait of Lady Anne Gerin, daughter of the Lord Fulking of Gainsborough's day.

Sookey looked at the sharp, piquant and individual beauty of Lady Anne, turned on Paul, said:

"You brought me here because she's—me?"

"Oh, you see it this time," he smiled.

"And I see why I knew the other now. She's like me too—but not so like as this."

"No, not so startlingly," he admitted; "yet very much like you, Sookey, and they are both of the same family. It's rather extraordinary, isn't it?"

"It's astonishing," said Sookey. "This Lady Anne is uncanny—it might be me in costume. Every detail—mouth, chin, the way I hold my head. It *is* extraordinary."

"Your eyes are darker, that's the only difference."

"My mother was a gipsy," said Sookey, before she realized what she had said. Paul laughed outright.

"Bill Roberts must have been the Gerin, then!"

In a flash Sookey found this adventure changed from inconsequence to extreme personal significance. She remembered that Bill Roberts was not her father, that she did not know who was her father. The whole mysteriousness of her birth seemed to crowd in on her at that, and that mysteriousness to be abruptly and dazzlingly illuminated by the memory of her talk with her sister Min. Min had said that Old Sookey had been in service with the Fulkings. Min had said she had seen letters from the Fulking house kept secretly in Old Sookey's chest of drawers. Remembering that, looking at the extraordinary likeness of herself that was also the likeness of a Fulking, she felt that the answer to the riddle of her birth was here.

Paul Geneste was explaining how he had come upon this queer discovery while she thought. A cousin had come up from Cornwall, and to satisfy her appetite for pictures he had taken her to the Royal Academy and the National Portrait

Gallery at one headachy swoop. It was thus that the sharpness of the coincidence was brought home to him. That two girls of one family should be so like Sookey seemed to him a thing not to be kept from Sookey.

He talked on in high good humour. He had theories. He had theories of the human structure being the same in many cases despite different ranks. He had theories, even, about Bill Roberts, since Bill had come up. Quite a number of people living in slums could trace a line back through cadet branches to nobility, so why not Bill Roberts?

Sookey did not bother about Bill Roberts. Bill Roberts was not her father. She grew more sure there was more in this than Bill Roberts. She said, making a joke of a thought that was crystallizing within her: "You don't think, then, that I'm a daughter of Lord Fulking stolen when young by gipsies? . . . My mother is a gipsy, you know."

He seized upon that—as humour. He said it was the only thing that explained Sookey perfectly: her beauty, her fastidiousness, her instinctive aristocracy. He said: "You'd better inquire into the old gentleman's past to see if he hasn't at least a secret marriage tucked away somewhere."

A secret marriage seemed to open possibilities.

It was not merely that the thought appealed to her; every fact she gathered seemed to point logically to it as conclusion.

She had been an alien in Cherry Pie Gardens. She had had tastes, instincts, traits alien to Cherry Pie Gardens. Women whispered that there was a secret about her birth. Old Sookey, even, had been astonished at certain traits coming out in her. Many—Mr. Meggie, the O'Garas—had seemed to feel certain that she had gentle blood in her. She had felt absolutely certain herself. Now there were these pictures of the Gerins, and they linked up with the fact that Old Sookey had been in service with the Gerins. . . . It *must* mean something.

She studied Lord Fulking in "Who's Who." Lord Fulking was not the old fellow Paul thought. He was forty-seven. As she was twenty-two, it gave the suggestion of a secret marriage in the early twenties an air of plausibility. Lord Fulking was a patron of the arts, too. All his life he had been a benefactor of art and artists. He had built galleries, he had introduced artists afterwards celebrated to the world. He had even practised art a little, as a gold medal for drawing indicated. That explained her, her strong creative impulse in art. She might have that from him—or—or, say, the secret wife, who might have been a fellow-student of his art school days.

But other things did not fit in. Lord Fulking, it seemed, was also an upholder of all the virtues. He was on austere committees—National, Political, Church, County. His record made it plain that he was a nobleman of the old school, taking life and himself with the greatest propriety, strictly upholding the grim and ancient virtues in the face of modern looseness and licence.

He seemed always to have been so, and that didn't tally with a clandestine marriage. Yet Sookey clung to that marriage. She was driven to accept it. She was certain that this man must be her father, and, that being so, there was nothing else. Besides, her romantic desire was all in favour of it.

The theory she built up in her mind was romantic, but it was also simple and fairly logical. She married Lord Fulking as a student to a fellow-student—her mother. The marriage was kept secret because of the difference in rank. Her mother, she felt, had died at her birth, and Lord Fulking had awakened at her death to the folly of his indiscretion. How to get rid of her, Sookey, the evidence of that folly?

Old Sookey came in here. Old Sookey was a servant in the Fulking house. Old Sookey, already entangled with the dubious Frank Tiles and a mistress of dubious ways, had no

doubt already played a part in the secret marriage. Easy to fit Old Sookey in. For a lump sum down Old Sookey had taken charge of the child and saved Lord Fulking, as he was now, from disgrace. Those private letters of Old Sookey's must be about this. What else could they be about? Why else would she keep them secret?

The story seemed to her to be more natural the more she thought of it, and she thought of it a great deal. And it was the story she wanted to believe, too. It explained so much of herself to herself. It gave her an established right to take her place in the life she felt to be the only life worth while. She was even glad that Lord Fulking was austere. It lifted her above the ruck of the smart set; it placed her on a level with Lord Mariven.

Max knew Lord Fulking: "Know Fulking? Oh, lord, yes, painfully. He's one of the pillars of the Lord. An awful sober old stick—patriarchal. He's like having the Prophet Isaiah in the family."

"You're related?" said Sookey.

"Vaguely. Most of us are. Seventh or eighth cousin. Don't let's talk about the little lad, anyhow; the mere thought of him feels like a lecture entitled, 'What I Owe to My Exalted Position.'"

Sookey wanted to talk about him. She tried to draw information by a method that Max usually responded to. She said she had heard a hint of scandal about Lord Fulking.

"What, about old Fulk? Tell me; it may be a stone for the sling of David."

Sookey explained guardedly that she was not certain if Lord Fulking was the man talked of, but what she had heard had something to do with a secret early marriage.

"It's a stumer, then," said Max regretfully. "It could not have happened to Fulk. He was born proper, and his mother was a raging dragon of applied virtue. It's never

been in him to demean himself like us lesser mortals. Not that he's not a good fellow. He means well, only he is so powerfully afflicted with responsibility and tradition."

"I've never seen him about," said Sookey, and wondered what was behind the curious look Max gave her. If Max was not so intimate and courteous, she might have thought it was his equivalent to Goose Common's: "Well, of all the blinkin' cheek!"

He said, with a laugh: "Old Fulk don't mix with the common herd. Might as well expect the Archangel Gabriel to step down and take a hand at bridge. He sits aloof in a most exclusive heaven marking the 'p's' and 'q's' for rackety ones like me."

"He must be rather trying," said Sookey; and again he gave her that queer look.

"Oh, trying by all means, but he's no man to take liberties with. Lord Fulking *means* something, take it from me."

She knew what that meant. Lord Fulking was a member of that exclusive inner circle jeered at as frumpish by the outer and smarter set and feared for its power. The approval or disapproval of his kind could make or break anybody.

He was just the sort of father she most needed.

CHAPTER XXIX

Max was also the source of other information. On one particularly gossipy day he retailed two tit-bits, both of which disturbed her in their different ways.

The first was about Lady Poppy.

"Poppy's getting that people-aren't-noticing-me-enough feeling," he said one Saturday, when they were out in his car. "Truth is, you've both wiped her out of the limelight and made her too rich, Sue. She's beginning to say that she's fed up with running a shop, and is looking for other fields to conquer. From the look of it, it's going to be Exploration. She fancies that to be a female Livingstone will hit the public bang in the eye."

"You mean she'll give up 'Poppée's'?" cried Sookey. "But she can't do that now we have got it in full swing."

"You don't know Poppy. Giving it up in full swing—magnificent gesture! Just the sort of thing Poppy delights in." He said, after a pause: "If she does, what'll you do, Sue?"

Sookey had been startled, but not upset. She had a good deal of money in the bank. She had more than that—a a reputation and a clientele. The closing of "Poppée's" need not be a loss to her; might even be a gain. . . . Sookey's quick, decisive brain looked ahead; she saw herself as mistress of her own gifts, taking full profits, not a mere commission from those gifts.

"I shall be all right, Max," she smiled. "I can exist without Poppy."

"I bet you can," he grinned, glaring calmly through his

wind-screen at a man whose crime apparently lay in the fact that he would walk on his right side of the road when Max, Lord Mariven, wanted to be on it too. "I bet you'll be able to do what you jolly-well like, Sue—with anybody or your future. All the same, just feel that there's at least one pal ready to rally round when you need him."

"Thanks, Max; I know," said Sookey. "It's like you and kind of you, and I won't hesitate if the need comes. But I don't think it will. I'm one of those people born to stand on their own feet."

Max was silent for a number of miles, as though he resented her ability to stand on her own feet.

It was on the way back to London that he gave her the second tit-bit.

"By the way, I hear that your pal of the Cromwell mould —what's his name, Geneste?—is to go in with Charley Socian, and that all the soundest female constitutions west of the Park are already hunting through the 'Brit' for symptoms that will not clash with a hearty appearance."

Sookey was startled into a long silence. This item seemed to her more shocking than the news about Lady Poppy. She said at last: "It's just mere gossip, I suppose."

"What is?" asked Max. "Oh, the bit about Geneste. I doubt it on evidence. You see, Charley has been trotting him round to see what moral effect he'd have on the paying sex. The reaction has proved all and more than Charley asked. Apparently the hickory beauty of your friend has an immense pull. Fact—I've heard the way women talk about him. Up to this, however, Geneste has thought concentration on germs much more important than the innards of Mayfair, and has held off. That's the official view; some think it the chap's cleverness, for Charley, in his eagerness to get him, has gone to the limit in terms. Now, because of the terms, probably, germs have lost their voluptuous charm. . . . But

I'm giving you the news of the day before yesterday, surely, Sue. You must know all about it."

Sookey knew nothing at all about it, and was amazed at the profundity of the dismay it caused, although, when she went back over Paul's unexpected interest in smart life, she felt that all Max said was true. When she met Paul two days later she said to him: "Come to dinner to-morrow. I want to have that talk we've put off too long."

"So do I," said Paul, with, for him, a curious unease. "I have to go to the Farleys' to-morrow, though."

"We'll go on together," she said, "and we need not show up until late."

When they were seated in the boldly, simply and beautifully designed drawing-room of her flat, she threw aside the small talk of the meal and said point-blank:

"I heard a rumour the other day that you were going into Harley Street?"

"Why should you suppose it mere rumour?"

"It's true, then?"

"Quite true. Charles Socian has offered me a partnership on most generous terms."

She couldn't fence with him; she said abruptly:

"It's horrible, Paul."

"Horrible," he said, trying to maintain an attitude of good humour. "It's not so profound as all that."

"Paul, why are you doing it?" she demanded without humour and a good deal of ferocity.

"Why am I . . . Well, aren't you the last to need an answer to that? From your point of view, I've come to my senses at last."

But her point of view seemed strangely different when it considered him.

"Come to your senses—lost them, you mean. You've no right to do such a thing. And you know it."

"Sookey!"

"You know it's the truth. That sort of life for you—it's a degradation."

He was genuinely astounded. He had depended upon her at least to support him in his step.

"Sookey, my dear, you amaze me," he cried. "Why, you yourself . . ."

"Me . . . Leave out me. I'm different. I'm frankly material, but you're not."

"Why should I be different from the rest?"

"You know you are," she said angrily. "Your work's research, and you can't evade the truth."

He stiffened against himself as well as against her.

"I don't agree. I've been into all that, and I don't agree."

"The O'Garas were certain of it. And what about your lectures at the hospital—aren't they certain?"

"I, surely, know best myself. I've hammered it all out. I can see I haven't the temperament for that sort of thing. I couldn't stand the dull plodding along, the poor reward, the lack of recognition, being cut off from the world. It's not a life; it's a dead end." He tried to rally. "It means I've faced facts with your cold common sense, Sookey, that's all. And, 'pon my honour, you're treating a specialist's work very lightly, you know. It isn't entirely useless."

"That sort isn't much good; it's pandering to the imaginary ills of a lot of over-fed, over-pampered, over-sexed women."

"We're getting on to ground where the matter had better be dropped," he said coldly.

She was before him, her eyes, the whole of her slim good looks bristling with such a fierceness that he shrank from her.

"We won't drop it. We won't!" she cried. "You can't throw up a career like yours for this doll-doctoring without a fight. It's selling your soul, Paul."

"Aren't you getting a little absurd?" he snapped. "What

do you know about my career? . . . Grubbing along in a backwater, and probably without the slightest success or use for the world, all because I'm inflated enough to fancy I have a heaven-sent genius. It's sheer conceit to think that I am anyway out of the ruck——"

"You're talking against your convictions," she said.

"I'm the best judge of my convictions," he cried, with a sudden unleashing of anger. "In any case, I should like to know what gives you the right to discuss them?"

She stood looking at him. It was true. What right had she to feel so profoundly about him? Yet she did. She said slowly:

"I'm sorry, Paul. I did not mean to quarrel, but this thing seems so terribly wrong."

"Why do you talk in that exaggerated strain?" he broke in.

"It doesn't seem exaggerated. It feels exactly like that. Don't be annoyed, Paul, but don't you feel yourself you are doing wrong?"

He answered with an air of reasonableness, but there was an effort behind it:

"Let us be sensible, Sookey. I've had it all out with myself; it's taken months of thought, and I'm not jumping blindly. I've decided that it's extremely doubtful that I have any special gift for research, and that success in it would be problematical. I've seen, and Charles Socian is quite certain of it, that I might do well in Harley Street. More, Socian has backed his opinion with a most cordial invitation to join him, and on handsome terms. Well then, what is the practical thing to do? Only one thing—to give up the uncertainly for the certainty, to give up a mere theory, a mere dream, for a definite fact. We've got to look at this with common sense, Sookey."

"No," she said evenly, "if your sort looked at things with

common sense, nothing big would ever have been done in the world."

He flushed, said: "That comes strangely from you, Sookey. Your philosophy of life . . ."

"I told you I am different, and my case is different, too. I'm material-minded. My outlook and my gifts are material —this dress and room designing talent of mine, how could I realize it if not in a material way? And then I've had to fight up from the dregs—I can't justify myself unless I make something big and important of myself. But you are different, Paul; you're—you're one of the rare bits of good timber in a world of weeds; you remember your own words? You've got a noble gift to be handled nobly. You are dedicated, don't you see? All this smartness and brightness is good enough for me, but you are too good for it. . . . Do you see? . . . I can't put it well. . . ."

Sookey was putting it too well. Paul reddened, he shrugged, put his hands in his pockets; and it was fear that he couldn't stick to his guns before her attack that made him shut the door on all arguments by saying:

"Well, it's finished now. . . . I've been over the same ground myself, my dear, but had to decide against it. I've fixed up with Charles Socian. I join him practically at once."

He waited for some sort of answer; she said nothing, but the way she looked at him made him say, though he had already determined that it would expose his weakness to say it: "Anyhow, it's sensible to give it a six months' or a year's trial. I've arranged that. If I don't like it, if I feel that, after all, research is my true line, then I'll give up Harley Street and go back to it."

They went to the reception in a silent mood. Paul was in a condition of bruised anger and astonishment. That Sookey of all people should be the one to turn on him amazed him.

He had relied on her support. He had even taken this step because he felt she would approve. He realized that that had been the consideration that had finally swung him. He wanted an ambition that fitted in with her ambition. He was bewildered at the unexpectedness of her hostility.

He would have been more bewildered if he could have read Sookey's thoughts just then.

She was asking herself if marrying Paul would save him for research.

She ought herself to have been astonished by this. She was not. It came naturally. She accepted the thought as simply as she had accepted the idea that she must run risks with Alf Naylor to save Paul in the Rotherhithe days.

Without knowing of the parallel, she saw that Paul was like a novice in a monastery facing his final vows. He had been suddenly overwhelmed by the thought of all he must give up when he definitely accepted his vocation. It was, she felt, but a momentary panic, and could be lived down if he kept steadfastly on.

She also realized the part she herself had played in swaying Paul towards material things. Paul might not be in love with her, but she knew that he was unconsciously drawn towards her, and that he had an instinctive desire not to be cut off from her, but to share the glamour of her life. This desire had been the last pressure on a will already shaken by the temptations of Sir Charles Socian.

She stopped here to ask if she herself was in love with Paul. She could not answer. He moved her in an extraordinary way. He could call to something in her that no other man, not even Max, could touch—and yet she did not know. The things he called to clashed so drastically with the things she was firmly resolved to be, the things that Max stood for. She decided that she was not in love with Paul, that she was not the loving sort. Though she thought of

marriage, she thought of it only as an expedient. She thought of it not as altering her ambitions, but as something that would enable Paul to share their glory and continue research at the same time.

She was, as things went, a rich woman, who would become steadily richer. Lady Poppy's intention of closing her shop seemed to make this a certainty. She was at the top of her fame, she had hosts of personal clients, many of whom knew her better than they knew Lady Poppy. She had only to open her own account, and they would flock to her. She would draw her full profits then, and her income would leap enormously. She must become richer. She must become more famous.

That was what Paul needed, a rich and famous wife. One who could save him from all financial worries while he went on with his research work, one who could take him out among famous people when that work was over. The picture came to her with a lovely glamour that surprised her by its sweetness. She saw Paul and herself living in a house in the West End of London, one that had a laboratory, or better, one where she could build for him the perfect laboratory. She saw the perfect harmony of their mutual work by day, the glory of their movement among august people by night. That little house might even become the centre of a new and important circle of life—a circle of intellectual aristocracy.

An attractive picture. Sookey might have settled upon it as a delightful way out for both of them had she not been so profoundly unsentimental in practical matters. She knew it would not do. Paul was not the type that could owe advancement to a wife. Like herself he must stand on his own feet or not at all. And she was glad of it. She knew that she could not respect a man who was not of that fibre.

Yes, that way out was impossible, and she gave up the

idea with a regret that surprised her, but also with a relief that seemed perfectly natural. Such a marriage would curtail her own ambitions. Paul, queerly attractive though he was, would never give her the social status she so greedily needed. Even if he became honoured as a great scientist it would fall short of the very highest triumphs, the triumphs she felt necessary to the daughter of Lord Fulking (as she was certain she was), and the genius she was.

With her blood and instincts she meant to soar to the highest plane a human being could, and her marriage must be a part of that ambition—its crown. She could not marry a nobody. Her husband must fix her decisively as a member of the highest social caste. He must make her unmistakably a great personage for life.

She found herself thinking of Max.

Max belonged to that circle that was more exclusive, auspicious and powerful than any other in the land. The circle she felt she naturally belonged to by blood. It was the circle that dictated to the world. To marry Max would be to make certain of her place in that circle. It would be the crown her life demanded.

CHAPTER XXX

Paul Geneste became Sir Charles Socian's partner almost immediately, and as immediately half the boudoirs in Mayfair seemed to be thrilling over him as a new experience. The O'Garas had been right. His ugliness had a curious fascination for gently nurtured women, and the curtness that went with it seemed to give him a power that was almost mesmeric.

Sookey put him outside her mind for the moment. The finality of his step seemed to finish the matter. More, the way in which affairs were coming to a head at "Poppée's" gave her plenty to think about.

As Max had said, Sookey had made Lady Poppy Craryn rich, so rich that she could now afford to indulge her resentment against the girl who had made her fortune.

Lady Poppy had disliked Sookey from their first interview —Max had been so favourably disposed towards this brilliant and beautiful girl. She had had to fight a battle between her hostility and her own interest ever since, and as Sookey's reputation grew it became a fiercer and fiercer battle.

She resented Sookey's earnings. She felt she had been tricked over this. She felt that if she had known how great Sookey's success was to be she would never have consented to such a scheme of commission. As she paid great sums to Sookey she had the sensation that the girl was deliberately robbing her. It meant nothing to her that the sums she paid to Sookey represented but a small fraction of the wealth the girl's genius had earned for her; her heart bled at having to sign cheques that ran into thousands for a mere chit of a shop hand.

Those days when they did the commission accounts were

days of battle. Lady Poppy questioned and fought over every figure with an avarice that would have filled Cherry Pie Gardens with admiration. The startling sums that Sookey earned through designing rooms were an especial sore point. Lady Poppy tried to insist that the commission agreement had been based on costumes only, and that large sums like these called for a smaller percentage. Sookey agreed that it was true she had not contemplated this phase of work, but it was plain their agreement was for "all designing" done for "Poppée's." She pointed out that she on her side had loyally abided by the agreement by crediting such work to "Poppée's," though much of it had come to her outside "Poppée's," and had, moreover, been done in her own time, since she was far too occupied in the shop to do more than plan frocks. If Lady Poppy insisted that the agreement covered frock designing only it cut both ways. The room designing must then be counted as her own work, and Lady Poppy owed her not commission but the whole sum paid. In any case, if Sookey had known she was going to do such work she would have demanded a higher precentage for it.

Lady Poppy fought with all weapons, scrupulous and unscrupulous; she tried to defeat Sookey by charm, by bringing her social position to bear, by scorn, by trying to make Sookey feel that she was common and money-grubbing to quibble over such matters. Sookey was too much for her. Sookey's shrewdness and ability were superior, she had a clearer intelligence, she was more downright and quick-witted. She defeated Lady Poppy at every move.

Lady Poppy's antagonism developed into detestation as Sookey became more famous. She was furious at having to play second fiddle to this girl in her own shop to her own friends even. When friends came in and demanded Sue Lee, and refused to be satisfied with herself, she was torn with jealousy. When new and more important customers

came in and treated Sue Lee as though she were "Poppée," and herself as though she had no meaning or existence at all in her own shop, she was furious. It was as much as she could do to prevent herself snubbing these customers out of the place—only the knowledge of the money she would lose checked her.

But her deepest hatred of Sookey arose through Lord Mariven.

Lady Poppy considered Max her private property, and to find that he was attracted by the youth, looks, naturalness and novelty of Sookey begot a fury beside which other dislikes were but pale shadows. When she found Max coming far too often to the shop, and that she was not the reason, when she found that belittling Sookey as a common little shop hand had no effect, she had planned to keep him away by entangling him in engagements with herself.

The common little shop hand had made this possible. Lady Poppy was of little significance in "Poppée's" now. She left Sookey and the others to do the work, went everywhere, and saw that Max went with her.

At first she thought this a successful move, but learnt in time how Max was evading it, how his consistent lateness in keeping appointments arose from his seizing the opportunity of her being out of the way to see Sookey. This was bad enough, but he gradually began to cut appointments and to ignore Lady Poppy altogether. Quarrelling with him did little good. Up to a point Max treated a quarrel as a joke—beyond that point he could be dangerous. His was a strange nature. He could change from his genial, indolent self-sufficiency in a flash into something like a fiend. It was as though the Viking strain that made his extraordinary good looks was also in his moral make-up, and he could go berserker at moments. In those moments he was ungovernable, and would stop at nothing either in word or deed.

Even Lady Poppy was afraid of him then, and afraid of the results of his rages, too. Reconciliation was very difficult after them. She feared that in one of them he would turn away from her for good.

In facing the problem of Max, as well as the other points of the situation, Lady Poppy decided to give up her shop.

She had already lost attention, and knew that it was time to create a stir in some other direction. She had, for the time, lost the interest of Lord Mariven, and the only way to regain that was to make him miss her.

She came to the conclusion that to go exploring in the wilds of South America would serve both ends. At that time women explorers were practically non-existent. For her to make this dangerous journey into the unknown would be to focus public attention on her to a more than ordinary degree. More, returning in a blaze of glory as the heroine of an excited world, she would catch Max's attention again. By that time he would have got all he wanted out of this little hussy, Sue Lee, and, bored, would be ready to turn to her more accomplished charms.

More, her act should put an extinguisher on the girl. Sue Lee, she was confident, owed all her success to the unique chance and the unique support "Poppée's" had given, and Sue Lee absolutely depended upon "Poppée's" to realize herself. Shut up "Poppée's," and Sue Lee was shut up too.

Sookey guessed what was in her employer's mind, and recognized that Max quite as much as damaged *amour propre* was at the back of the move. She was disgusted at the woman, and felt sorry for Max being drawn into such a business.

She had always liked Max. He was not merely an extraordinary phenomenon in male good looks and a man of rank into the bargain, he was a most attractive personality too.

He was always genial, always good company; the lazy air with which he cloaked an adroitness in getting the best out

of everything amounted to a genius. Sookey found that his careless and rather boyish manner cloaked a great deal of determination, and that he had a very certain sense of his own significance in spite of the bold and happy-go-lucky attitude with which he faced life. She could not help being attracted by the steady determination of his interest in her, and the calm way he seized every opportunity to be with her amused and pleased her.

What were his relations with Lady Poppy she did not know. They went about a great deal together, and she knew that he had put money into "Poppée's," but beyond that their friendship seemed casual and offhand, though warm enough. The very boldness with which they went about together seemed to discount anything clandestine, and though Sookey had heard a great many hints about them, she had heard nothing that indicated an affair, nor seen anything. She herself thought that it was no more than a great friendship, or, if it was more, it was an attempt on Lady Poppy's part to capture him and his title—which was extremely well worth while.

From her own intercourse with him she felt that there was nothing between Max and Lady Poppy. He was always considerate, never making advances, never pushing his claims. It was good fun going about with him; she and he had the same zest in life.

It was he who kept her informed of Lady Poppy's plans: "Poppy's made up her mind about this South American jaunt," he told her; "collecting outfit and guns and cameras—especially cameras—already. It's all up with 'Poppée's.'"

"Isn't she going to tell us herself, Max?"

"She says a month's notice is all that is necessary, and she'll give you that. The last month is going to be a sale."

Sookey saw the point of that, if Max didn't. She would dispose of "Poppée" dresses at reduced prices—cut down

Sookey's commissions that way, and swamp the market with her exclusive designs.

"Made any plans yet, Sue?" he asked.

"Plenty," she smiled; "but no sound ones so far. But I'll find a way, Max."

"In the dress line?"

"What else?"

"Seems a tearing pity that a girl like you should have to do that sort of thing," he said, looking at her steadily. "There's all day to have a good time in—not only a few evening hours."

"I can't afford all day yet," she laughed.

"I don't know," he said slowly. "Between good pals . . ."

"Don't be silly, Max," she said sharply, and frowning a little. "You're either talking without thinking—or unpleasantly."

His strange crack of a laugh came. "Why either?" he grinned. "As a matter of fact, I was only soliloquizing on the fact that you're darn good company, Sue."

She used to wonder whether the presence of Lady Poppy in England held him back. He frequently seemed on the verge of breaking into a greater intimacy, but always seemed to pull himself up.

Still, he seemed keen to discuss her prospects with her, though, as she pointed out, he had a natural taste for gloom in that matter. It was he who harped on her discovery that it would be practically impossible to get another shop of a suitable kind in the West End about the time when "Poppée's" was shut up. He had also told her that Lady Poppy had three years of her lease to run, and would make a point of keeping her out of it. "Seems to me, Sue, there'll be nothing for you to do but to take a position in one of the big shops—

if you must go on at this sort of thing. You'll hate to have a limited liability company sitting on your neck."

Sookey already hated the idea, and was dreading that it would come to it. But not until Bert Tavener pointed the way did she see her means of escape.

She had met Bert many times since the parting with Claudine, but, apart from friendship, he counted less and less in her life. She was fond of him, and he was fond of her, but both understood quite candidly that they had very little in common. "If I had to live with this long," grinned Bert, looking round the rooms of her flat, "I'd die of the willies."

Nevertheless, Bert, who would probably be English champion at his weight after his next fight, was a man to discuss serious business with. He had a good, staunch Irish shrewdness, which was probably more responsible for the financial success of his progress than the smart, slick manager he was always boasting about.

He said to Sookey, "Lady Poppy's got a three-year lease to run, you say. Well, buy it off her, girl."

"She won't sell to me," said Sookey.

"For good red money most people will sell anything," said Bert. "Especially a thing they don't want themselves. Especially when they're such dollar wolves as you've proved this dame is."

"It's no good," said Sookey; "she won't sell to me."

"You seem plumb certain. How do you know? She told you?"

"No," said Sookey. "Her great friend, Lord Mariven, told me."

"*That* twit!" said Bert, with a sudden snort of disgust.

She stared at him. "Lord Mariven is a great friend of mine, Bert."

"Sorry for you. His real name is dirt."

"What have you against him?" she said fiercely. "Gossip —scandal——"

"Even that's bad enough," he frowned. "Look here, Sookey, I'd go carefully with that chap. He's got a brute of a reputation. . . ."

"I don't want to hear," she said. "I've known him personally for some time, and I know enough to tell you that anything you've heard against him is a lie. We won't discuss him."

"And I'll get the push through the door if I attempt it," he grinned. "It's your funeral, anyway, Sook. Anyhow, you can tell me what he said about this lease."

She told him.

"It sounds, as you say, that she's got a spite against you," said Bert slowly, "partly because you've wiped her eye, partly because you and this Lord Mariven are friends. All the same, spite's a thing that can be useful in business. You go to her and tell her that you are willing to pay a fair sum for the goodwill and lease. Don't talk large now; insist that you haven't much money to spend."

"What would be the good? She'd snub me," said Sookey.

"That's what I'm counting on. How will she do it—by turning you down pat? That'll hardly give her the pleasure her sort likes. She'll do it by showing you where you get off. She'll name a figure she thinks right out of your reach. That's why you've got to pipe small about your cash. . . . What can you run to?"

"Five thousand at a pinch, but that would be a drain. . . . I shall want a great deal of money to go on in the proper way."

"Well, keep your figure as low as you can, and see that there are plenty of witnesses about when she names hers. Get her to put it into writing if you can—and then come back to me."

Sookey had no great hope, but she did as Bert suggested. They had already all had their notices, and there seemed no other way out. She chose the moment when she, Lady Poppy, the bookkeeper and the saleswoman went through the accounts previous to the final fortnight's sale. To her astonishment Bert had proved shrewder than herself. Lady Poppy, instead of giving a point-blank refusal, preferred to humiliate her, and to do it before the others. She drew Sookey out, and when Sookey offered four thousand pounds for the lease and goodwill, she cried contemptuously: "For a business like this. I wouldn't think of anything less than fifteen thousand pounds."

It amused her to turn the tables on Sookey. To dictate to the girl who had once dictated to her. She had the whip-hand, she named her own terms. She became more and more animated as she saw the protest and despair in Sookey's eyes.

She could not have it all her own way, for the bookkeeper and saleswoman seeing a chance of reprieve took part. They utilized the books to help beat down Lady Poppy's price. Lady Poppy would have liked to back out, but having become entangled in the discussion to do so would be a surrender to Sookey. And she felt anyhow that triumph would be hers. The books beat her down to something about six thousand pounds, but she clung to her estimate of the lease and goodwill, and said that she must have eight thousand pounds, or she would not consider the matter.

Sookey, her vivid spirit regretting that she could not deal with the woman physically in true Cherry Pie Gardens style, had to tell Bert that eight thousand pounds was rock-bottom price, and had been named before two witnesses.

"Good," said Bert. "You played her well, or she'd ha' stuck firm at ten or twelve thou. You got five you say, but you'll want some of that for refitting and carrying on. . . .

Say two thousand pounds." He took a cheque-book from his pocket, wrote out a cheque for five thousand pounds, and handed it across to her with: "There's the balance."

She said in a thick voice: "Bert, you're a darling. But we had this out before. I can't take money from you."

"We did have it out before," he grinned, "and the final ruling was that at a pinch you would take it. This is the pinch. Also an' moreover, you *ain't* taking money from me. I'm investing, an' a dam' good investment, too. I've listened while you've talked about your frock sales. . . . They make gold mines sound like amateurs for returns. Well, I don't mind getting some of those returns. You can put me down as a dividend earner at what dividend you like to fix. . . . Reasonable dividend, mark you, Sook."

"You'll be partner—half share," she said, choking.

"That's rubbish an' unbusinesslike," he said fiercely. "This is only idle money, and I don't put in brains, labour, nor stand the racket of overhead expenses. Give me ten per cent. . . . All right, fifteen per cent. of profits. An' no more, an' I'm earning a darn good return."

When Sookey tried to thank him, he jeered to cover his confusion: "Don't be a silly little clype, Sook. Much better fer this wad o' money to go out an' earn something good than to lay in the bank. I got plenty of it. . . . Besides, I'm proud o' what you've become from the kid you were. . . . An' I'm dam' proud at feeling like a full-blown financier myself. . . . Don't you see, it's me an' you what came out o' Cherry Pie Gardens what's putting it across the nobs like this."

The purchase of "Poppée's" went through swiftly to the surprise and perhaps the chagrin of Lady Poppy. There was only one queer side issue to the transaction—Max's anger.

He came to Sookey's flat the next Sunday afternoon in a

furious temper. He seemed ready to quarrel over anything, and to Sookey, who had never seen him like this, the darkness of his mood was appalling. Gradually she became aware that his fury had arisen at her purchase of "Poppée's," that itself and also the fact that she had got someone to finance her. He couldn't get over that—some other man had her favour.

"Don't be silly, Max," she said sharply; not even Lord Mariven was going to intimidate her. "If I choose to obtain help from an old friend, it concerns nobody but myself."

"An old friend," he growled. "Who?"

"A man I have known ever since I was a child," she said.

"That sick dowager's pet?" he snarled. "That wooden-faced doctor fellow?"

"Paul Geneste," said Sookey, surprised at his animosity against Paul, angry at the mention of Paul in such a scene. "No, not Paul Geneste. And, please, we will not go into this further."

But he was determined to go further.

"I'm your friend too," he snapped. "Why couldn't you come to me?"

"I didn't think of it," she said truthfully.

"I wonder——" he growled. "Wasn't good enough, I suppose."

"That'll do, Max," she said. "If you are going to talk like that you'd better go away."

He scowled at her with a lowering of gaze that would have meant a physical attack in Cherry Pie Gardens. He, however, pulled himself together enough to say:

"I feel hurt, very hurt, Sue, that you didn't come to me. I thought we were good pals."

She felt that his anger was a genuine reaction against her forgetfulness of his friendship. She said quietly:

"I'm sorry, Max. I really did not think of it. And as

for my friend lending me the money, it's not on any basis of friendship at all. It's a business deal pure and simple. He has become a partner."

"Wasn't I good enough as a partner?" he growled.

"It was he who thought of the plan of buying Lady Poppy out," she said.

"I could have told you that too," he snapped, then pulled up scowling. "I mean, if it'd occurred to me. You know I'm not a business man . . . if you'd only mentioned it, I could have done it."

"I suppose it was because you weren't very enthusiastic that I didn't mention it," she said.

"Well, it's a fact that it seems a shame to me that a girl like you should need to work at all. But you don't suppose I would have hesitated if I'd thought of it."

He was watching her closely, his eyes very attentive under his scowl. She knew what he was anxious about. He was afraid she was wondering why he had not used his influence, his financial interest in "Poppée's" to bring about the sale. She laughed at him:

"Can't you see that one of the reasons why I said nothing was because you were friends with Lady Poppy?"

"Oh—you saw I was friends!" He was looking at her queerly. "And you don't want us to be friends?"

"You're an awful child at times, Max," she said. "That wasn't it at all. I didn't want to drag you into this trouble. *Would* you have liked to have joined in the squabble over terms?"

He frowned at her for a minute. "You're an amazing lad, Sue," he said. "Can't make head or tail of you at times."

"Don't try," she laughed. He was no better than a big boy in his surliness. "Just take me and things as they come."

"Take is good," he said presently. "You won't take a

bean of mine—but I've got to take a cool three thou. of *yours*."

"Is it a riddle, Max?" she said, after a moment. "I don't see it."

"Simple enough. When Poppy started that rag shop I put up two thousand pounds. Didn't expect or want it back, of course. Now she's bunged it back at me with another thousand on top, and if I try to protest, she produces all manner of certified accountants to prove it's my share of the loot. Bright, isn't it? It's as though *you* were slipping a tip into my hand."

Sookey stared at him, feeling for him, feeling inclined to laugh. The real cause of his anger, then, was that his generosity should be returned with interest, and at what he thought her expense.

"Yes, bright's the word," he growled. "You don't like taking money from me. How do you think I feel taking it from you?"

"It isn't really from me?"

"Poppy hasn't left a doubt about that. It's my share of your purchase money—that means it comes straight from your pocket."

Sookey saw that this was a moment not for common sense, but for sympathy. Max was really hurt. She said: "I'm sorry, Max."

"That doesn't help a man feel less mean. To take money from you—it's a nasty one, Sue."

His harping on the point made her say: "I really am sorry, Max. If I'd known of this I would have come to you."

"Not you. You wouldn't take money from me; you don't like me enough."

"I would," she said, feeling quite safe now. "In this case especially. You see, it would have eased the purchase price. If I had had three thousand pounds less to pay, I'd

have more money to branch out, and I could do with it."

As soon as she said that she knew she had made a slip. He asked at once if she had paid the whole purchase price. She had not. She had paid half—four thousand pounds—and the remainder was waiting on the completion of the deeds at that moment. Directly she admitted that he had the whip-hand. He insisted that he should leave his three thousand pounds in the business so that she would have that much more to play with. For a moment she wondered whether he had tricked her into this position, but she put aside the thought as unworthy; he was so naïve and anxious that, having no reasonable argument to offer, she had to agree in the end.

She was not sorry to do it. She felt she had hurt him; she felt touched by his desire to be her friend, and she understood his genuine distaste for taking money from her. These generous and high-minded men were like that; they were willing and anxious to help others, to help women, but to receive money from a woman was horrible to them. She felt glad that she had met his generosity generously.

The encounter made her feel a real affection for him; his surliness, his ingenuousness, his boyish sense of chivalry made him a human fellow, a dear fellow. She felt he was lovable. If those wretched people who had talked gossip to Bert about him only knew him as she knew him they might realize the depths of their own meanness.

The meanness of the people among whom she was now living was beginning to disgust her. It was another reason why she respected and valued men of Max's high type.

CHAPTER XXXI

Sookey's trust in her own capacity and genius was more than justified. In the months that followed her assuming supreme control of the shop she developed almost into a cult.

Fortune was on her side. The new scantier skirt, known as the hobble-skirt, depended on a new bold simplicity of treatment in line and colour, and those were exactly the qualities Sookey most possessed. Her effective method of handling brave, raw colours in mass, those clamant yellow, orange, purple, red and green masses that later were called variously Futuristic, Russian Ballet, and even "jazz" effects, shocked many, entranced most.

To wear a "Sue Lee" design became a necessity to those who wished to figure among the advanced and advancing. To dress in a complete "Sue Lee" scheme through all the changes of the day, to have "Sue Lee" rooms for one's background, to move about in "Sue Lee" motors—that is to have the colour scheme of one's car designed down to the upholstering to emphasize one's individuality, complexion or hair for this season—to have the binding of one's books and the tone of one's table china planned by "Sue Lee" was the thing.

Sookey's distinctive talent and novel schemes were at the root of her success, but Max was an excellent publicity agent, too. Max threw himself heart and soul into the booming of Sue Lee—once Lady Poppy had departed to her charming jungles. He had his flat in St. James Street gutted, and then re-schemed from door-knocker to kitchen by Sookey, and the electric impact of that flat on the minds of the seekers of the last-word sensations brought scores to Sue Lee. In the same way Max interested a West End theatrical man (partly by

putting a solid sum into the production) in Sue Lee, and she designed all the costumes and half the scenery of what proved to be the most gorgeous musical show of the season. She enjoyed that work; it was like painting on a big scale. She had all the scope she wanted to express her ideas in colours and their combinations. She was immensely successful. Actually her work was the only sign of talent in the show, and the reaction of her sumptuous poems in colour—the splendid greens and blues and violets of the Forest scene, the old rose interior, the Ming scene of blue and yellow, and so forth—was so extraordinary that the rise of the curtain on each was the precursor of a gasp and a thunder of applause that drowned the first verse and a half of the chorus—an act of grace in itself.

From that point onward Sue Lee was the rage. With the extraordinary prodigality of their kind the smart set overwhelmed her. Working though she was at high pressure, she could only deal with a third of the orders that poured in. Stiffening her prices seemed only to increase the desire. The amount of money she made almost shocked her; it seemed to her beyond reason and decency. The amount of adulation she received began to sicken her.

There was too much of it; its excess seemed fulsome to her cool and steady nature. She knew there was an artificiality in it, a desire to exhibit her as a new sensation, a desire to make use of her, a desire to flatter her for ends that had nothing to do with friendship or affection; these people seemed to think that the grossest flattery would delight her, and make her amenable to their intentions.

There were half a dozen men who wanted to wear her as a gage to their own importance. They were not merely anxious to give her the designing of their own flats and houses, but also the run of them.

These men did not astonish her because she had been bred

in Cherry Pie Gardens. They merely made her think of Cherry Pie Gardens. Their moral outlook, and even their methods, were exactly the same. Where in Cherry Pie Gardens a man ruined and lived with a girl for the money and ease her earnings would provide, these were ready to do the same thing for the reputation and admiration the girl would bring. They took it for granted she had no kind of morality, and her reluctance to surrender was to them but an indication that she did not value their offer highly enough. And, of course, that lucky fellow Mariven had got in first.

One of them even mentioned his regret at this to Sookey, and told her that when she thought of making a change a house on the river garnished with himself and his banking account would be at her disposal. Sookey merely loathed him without troubling to think what he meant. She was becoming more and more certain that Paul had been right, that the world was mainly Cherry Pie Gardens with local differences in veneer, that was all.

Even Max could be a little trying. Max was charming, but he did not seem to realize that there was work to do which only she could do. Since Lady Poppy had gone he had wanted to devote more and more time to her, not merely after hours, but during the workaday. He wanted her to go with him to race meetings, for runs in his car, to those parties for which they had invitations during the day. Her constant refusal annoyed him.

"Hang it all, Sue, do you do it purposely? All this talk about work is rubbish. Poppy found plenty of time for holidays."

"She could, Max. She didn't mean anything. I do."

"Oh, stuff! What does it matter if you miss a day."

"It matters to me. I've got appointments to keep, promises to keep."

"Oh, let 'em slide."

"And where would I be?" she laughed.

"Better off without this," he snapped. "I consider it a darn nuisance anyhow, always spoiling a chap's plans. Why you stick the game beats me."

"It means me," she said. "Without it I don't count. It keeps me where I am, Max, makes somebody of me—and I like being somebody, Max."

"Oh, lord, just as if you couldn't be without all this."

"I couldn't—not yet. I've got to make my position solid first."

She meant that. She knew that if she was part of the life she desired she was yet only in it as a novelty. Let her vogue cease, and she ceased to count. She meant to make good for permanency—more, she meant to go even higher than she was now. Her ambition could not let her be content with less than the fixed stars. Max, frowning, said:

"You mean you'll give the shop up sometime, Sue?"

"I hope so," she said, looking at him steadily. "I want to live the whole of this life, not a part of it."

"That's what I keep on saying. What's holding you back? Cash! You must have made a pot already, Sue."

"There is that. I have made a pot, as you say, but not enough yet—but money's not the whole of it."

"I should think not," he said, glaring at her. "Why a girl like you should think so much about dollars, should think you need to think about 'em, makes me sore."

She ignored any suggestion in his remarks. She had long ago come to the conclusion that Max said things for effect without thinking. It was part of his unrecking good nature.

"Someone called me a material little baggage once," she said. "I suppose I am. But that's not the whole thing."

"What's the rest?" he growled.

She smiled at him: "I'll tell you, Max. A position of my own among you people. A house of my own in a good

part of the town. . . . A circle of my own of the best people. . . . People like Lord Fulking on my visiting list."

He stared at her. Suddenly his crack of a laugh came. "Well, if you ain't the quaintest little bird ever hatched, Sue," he said.

"Why?" she asked, frowning at him.

"Because you're you," he grinned. "A dear little kid—and most remarkably pretty." He pinched her chin. "There's no other girl in the world to touch you, Sue."

He was probably trying to change the line of her thoughts by praising her looks and charm, as was the habit of the male the world over, yet even though she saw through him, Sookey could not help being amused and affected by his boyishness. He, no doubt, thought her presumptuous; her chin stiffened, but not even he realized what Sookey of Cherry Pie Gardens could do when she meant to do it.

He never had his way in the matter of outings in her hours of work, but he made up for it by monopolizing her from dinner onwards. She supposed that people talked, they talked about anything, but it was left to Paul Geneste to make her aware how much.

She had not seen Paul for months, though he had grown a reputation that could not be overlooked. As he came towards her through the kaleidoscope of dresses—mainly her dresses or imitations of her dresses—with his old grim determination, she noticed how women wriggled and fawned at him, and how grey his face looked even as he answered the wriggles with a stark, artificial smile.

She said to him: "I don't see you at many of these sort of shows."

"I get all I want of this in my consulting-room," he said in a tone too flat for cynicism. "You are looking radiant, Sookey. Things continue to go well with you."

"I'm enjoying it all."

"All?" he asked rather fiercely.

"Why not," she smiled; and then she couldn't resist the little stroke: "But you must know that, since we share a mutual ambition."

She was sorry she said this when she saw him wince. The sight of him touched her. He was grimmer and more rough-hewn than ever, for he seemed thinner. His eyes looked strained, and there was a hard look about his mouth, as though constant shutting it on plain truth had battered it from the inside. He looked ill.

"Doesn't it go well, Paul?" she said softly.

"I'm overworked," he said stiffly. "We're crowded out with patients."

"I've heard of your success, Paul," she said. "You and I seem to be—be showing them what Goose Common can do. I'm glad—if you are, Paul."

He was staring gloomily at the mob before them.

"If only one or two of them were really ill," he said. He looked at her and laughed shortly: "I can see why I kept away from you, Sookey."

"Why?"

"You're the last person I can pretend to."

"Isn't that more reason why you shouldn't keep away?"

"An invitation to social suicide—oh, Lord," he said. . . . Again he pulled himself together. "No, don't crow, Sookey. I'm not myself to-day. I'm tired out. I've had a grinding time, and my energies are sapped. One gets those fits of despondency . . . purely physical and quite unreasonable. I ought to have gone to some play, that one with your wonderful dresses—I've seen it half a dozen times for your colours alone, Sue; or one of those musical comedies that send you to sleep; or I ought to have gone to bed."

"You couldn't merely stay at home and think about research, Paul?" she said quietly.

He caught his breath: "You hit hard, Sookey," he said harshly.

"Where you are concerned, Paul, yes."

He stared at her sombrely.

"Why?" he asked.

"I don't know," she said simply. "I just feel I have to."

Again he stared at her with a definitely searching look.

"Yet I'm certain I, the personal I, don't mean anything to you—not more than others."

"Yes, you do, Paul," she said; she had felt a curious stirring under his look, felt that there was some deep reason for her interest in him.

"Not love, though?" he said defiantly.

She was surprised to find that she had to think before she answered that, she who felt herself decisive at least on that point: "No, I don't believe I'm in love with you, Paul. I think you, and someone else, are the two I care for most in this world; but it isn't love, I think. I don't think I'm the loving sort."

He nodded as though he perfectly understood her. Then he said: "The other one is Mariven, isn't it?" She nodded. "I came along to find you to talk about him, Sookey. You're not in love with him?"

"Not honestly in love with him, Paul. I like him immensely."

He thought, and then said quietly: "Look here, you must not mind my blunt speaking, Sookey; it's for your sake; but I suppose you realize he's in love with you?"

"Yes, I suppose he is," admitted Sookey, "or he is inclined to be."

"Well, how is it going to end, Sookey?"

She smiled, shrugged her shoulders: "I'm very fond of him, Paul."

"Does that mean that it is going to end in the way such

affairs usually end with these people, in the way Mariven's affairs usually end?" he said sharply.

"Paul!"

"To-day," he said fiercely, "one of my patients told me as an undisputable fact that you were Mariven's mistress."

She stared at him too aghast, too angry to speak.

"She had no doubt about it whatsoever. She said he had thrown over 'Poppy Craryn for you, financed you, and set you up in your shop."

"And what did you say, Paul?" she cried.

His face cleared as he watched her.

"I lost a patient," he said, with a grim twist to his smile. "Not that it did any good. She did not believe my opinion of you, nor will any of her kind."

"There should be some punishment for people of that sort."

"You can't punish wholesale," he said. "It is not the first time I've heard the story, Sue."

"People are infamous."

"Maybe! Be fair to them, all the same. Haven't they something to build on? You *are* always with Mariven. It is said that he is constantly in and out of your shop—as though he really owned it. Such things give rise to talk."

"Surely one can be friends with a man without starting such vile scandals!" cried Sookey, as many another girl had cried before her.

"Apparently not with a man of Mariven's rank—and reputation."

"I know nothing about his reputation."

"I think you should," he said gravely. "It's pretty bad. Even a new-comer like myself has heard enough to sicken me."

"I don't want to hear!" she cried.

"That's not like you, Sookey," he said. "It's dodging the issue. . . ."

"It is not," she said, and she gained a satisfaction by saying it. "I take men, even Max, as I find them. You won't accuse me of being sentimental or blind to them—Cherry Pie Gardens forbid. I've met with nothing in Max, nothing serious that fits in with your suggestion of a reputation." Paul's lips compressed. "No, Paul, not a hint. Max has been charming, friendly, helpful, very jolly and courteous always. . . ."

"Lord Mariven's methods may be different, less direct, say, than Cherry Pie Gardens, Sookey," said Paul.

"That's mere supposition. My experience suggests not. He is one of the two men I have found who stand out in honourable conduct in their friendship with women."

"Two—I hope I'm the other, Sookey."

"You are the other, Paul," she said. "I place him on a level with you."

"Thank you, Sookey," he said quietly. "If you don't mind, I refuse to be put on the same level as Mariven." She looked at him darkly. He went on, "And you are forgetting Bert Tavener, too."

Mention of Bert cut short a sharp retort. She remembered quite suddenly that Bert had given Max an evil reputation. That took some of the sharpness out of her tone; nevertheless, her liking and experience made her say tartly:

"Bert is in a different category. And I'm afraid I shall have to think differently of you if you allow yourself to be swayed by gossip."

"Gossip does not affect me," he said. "I don't care a dump about this fellow or his reputation. I only care about you and yours, my dear. And you can be as angry as you like, but I'll not stand by and let you go the way you are going without warning."

They were facing each other, with a curious similarity between them. Her beauty, his forceful ugliness had a

strangely mutual look in the intensity of feeling and anger. She said almost bitterly: "And what way am I going?"

"How does such a companionship end?" he asked harshly. "Doesn't your common sense tell you?"

"There are other ways than beastly ways," she said.

He glowered at her, said deliberately:

"He won't marry you, Sookey, if that is what you are thinking."

She went pale. She said: "Even for you, Paul, that's an impertinence."

He went on quite grimly: "I'll tell you what my titled patient said. She was of his class, the exclusive within the exclusive. I countered her hateful gossip by suggesting that Mariven might have quite honourable intentions. And she laughed, Sookey—she thought the idea so absurd that she laughed at the mere thought of such a marriage."

"You're a cad, Paul," she said, shrinking back.

"Anything you like, but you've got to hear the truth. This woman who knew her class thought the mere idea of a Mariven marrying a nobody, a little shop girl, too preposterous for serious attention. She *knew* that Mariven wouldn't entertain the idea for a moment. He is essentially of his class, and, even if he did, the powers that be, his people, people like Lord Fulking, whose niece is so like you, all the real aristocrats would stop it. You are outside the pale, utterly, to them, and they will never admit you, and Mariven knows it."

Sookey, staring at him, feeling all the surge of Cherry Pie Gardens in her rage, longing to strike him, sat voiceless. And Paul had not finished.

"That was why he did not marry Lady Poppy Craryn, why he never will, though she tries hard enough. She's a woman of his own class, but her reputation is too much for the Marivens and the Fulkings. They won't have her at any price—and Mariven knows it—and agrees."

They sat staring fiercely at each other.

"You don't believe or agree to a word I say," he said.

"Not a word," she said fiercely. "I know Max, and it is not true."

He shrugged and got up.

"And I hate you, Paul!" she cried.

"I had to risk that," he said, and went away. He looked very tired and bent as he went.

She sat there thinking fiercely. She refused to believe Paul, refused to admit this limitation of her ambition, of herself. She hated Paul, she hated all these scandal-talking people, with their airs of being of a superior race, of a superior creation. She was more brilliant than most of them; she felt herself their equal in instinct and blood. She felt that if the truth were known about her birth, she was by birth their equal. She hated them; she was in a fury against them. She wanted to teach them, to "show them," as Sookey of Cherry Pie Gardens had never before wanted to show them. She wanted to show them through Max.

Max was position. Max, like herself, was the victim of scandalous tongues. She was not a prude; she thought it possible that Max had had affairs, but she thought he was inherently decent also. Max and she together—they could humble these people with a great gesture. She could prove herself through Max. She would show them that she was of the lordly class; she would dominate them.

As she sat thinking, sending people away on the plea of a headache, she began to feel a way of dealing with these people, of proving once and for all her right to lord it among them. She considered Old Sookey; she also considered all that Paul had said. She had a certain admiration for the bluntness of Paul under her anger at him, a certain respect for what he had said. She was being seen about too much with Max; that must be corrected.

Max, arriving late, protested.

"What do we care?" he scoffed.

"People are talking, Max."

"Let 'em. We don't mind."

When she insisted, he scowled at her. "What's the game, Sue? Getting fed up with me?"

"No, Max," she smiled; "perhaps even less so."

"I say," he cried, "I like that note. . . . I believe you're beginning to recognize I'm not such a bad chap after all."

"I never thought you were, Max." Then she said quietly: "You're fond of me, Max?"

He blinked a little. "By Jove!" he said. "By Jove! . . . Haven't you guessed it right along, Sue?"

"Very fond?"

"My darling old thing," he said, catching her hand. "There's no limit."

"And you'd marry me if you could?"

He stopped suddenly, her hand half up to his lips, his mouth agape, a queer fixity in his eyes. He didn't answer.

"Well, wouldn't you?" she demanded.

"What a queer bag of tricks you are, Sue." He laughed, but his eyes were steady. "What really amazing things you do jump out at a feller."

"But would you?" she demanded. "I know the difference of station and the difficulties, all that sort of thing—but if they weren't there *would* you marry me?"

He answered with an air of decision: "You know I would if I could, Sue. . . . Rotten how things are arranged, but there you are. . . . Where are you going, my dear?"

"I'm going home," she said. "I've got a lot to think out and some things to do."

"But, I say, what about me?" he protested.

"We'd better keep apart for the time," she said. "We don't want to give gossips a handle. . . ."

"But look here, Sue, after what has just happened. . . ."

"It'll only be for a time, Max," she smiled. "And don't worry; it'll all come right in the end."

"Honour bright?" he demanded suspiciously.

"Honour bright," she smiled.

CHAPTER XXXII

Sookey telephoned to Bert Tavener, and he spent the next evening with her.

Bert was a useful and satisfying personality. He was reliable, he was calm, he was understanding. He agreed to do all Sookey asked without troubling her with questions.

He agreed, that is, to go and see old Sookey next day, and to persuade her that it would be to her advantage to come with him and meet young Sookey. He recognized that it would not be well for Sookey herself to appear in Cherry Pie Gardens in her present condition. He also recognized that it would be wiser to see Old Sookey in such a manner as to make it difficult for her to trace her daughter for the purpose of blackmail.

At eleven o'clock the next morning Bert telephoned that he already had Old Sookey in his motor, and was going to run her down to Dorking. He mentioned the name of the hotel he would choose, and said he would hire a private sitting-room there.

Sookey herself left immediately for Dorking in a car she had waiting.

She set out with a feeling of certainty that she was about to prove her exalted parentage. There was no sense of this being a gamble. She was sure that, whoever her mother might have been, Lord Fulking or some member of his family was her father.

She already considered the thing practically proved. What her sister Min had told her fitted in with her own remarkable likeness to the Gerins of the two pictures. Her own instincts, her talents, all the hints and suggestions that she was superior to the class in which she had lived, were all evidence supporting the main fact. She was sure as she had been sure of her

right to take her place in the great life. She faced, with a sense of inevitability, the last step that would carry through the plan she had made for Max and herself.

Old Sookey was unchanged. She was tremendous, she was basiliskan even before the metamorphosis of this girl she had once called her daughter. She had aged with the strange rapidity of her gipsy blood and her class, and she seemed less formidable to Sookey. Nevertheless, she accepted Sookey's magnificence, her distinction and her accent with her natural unmoved air, and she was, as ever, ready to wait in stagnant-eyed imperturbability for others to attack rather than provide openings herself.

Unpleasant though she was, there was about her a dignity of forcefulness that is only covered by the word aristocratic. In her rusty and redundant black garments she was almost startlingly akin to several ruthless old dowagers of title Sookey had watched dominating gatherings in the West End.

She was drinking porter and listening emotionlessly to Bert's blow by blow account of his latest victory in the ring, when Sookey appeared. Her eyes alone moved. She did not even greet the girl, but swept her with that slow comprehensive glance Sookey knew of old. It was a glance that not merely assessed the girl's state of life—virtuous or otherwise—but also her worth as a cash asset. Sookey smiled and wondered whether the capable brain of Old Sookey was baffled. She had put on an old black silk frock she had used in the shop, but she knew that the cut and material would have meaning to the old woman—she knew that the fact that she could afford to ride in motor-cars would have meaning.

Old Sookey sat voiceless and calm while Sookey and Bert exchanged remarks, and she remained so even after Bert had left them alone. Sookey was not intimidated; she realized that she herself had a force of will akin to the old woman's, and could meet her on equal terms.

Old Sookey only listened to her opening greetings, and broke through them with a sniff. She attacked immediately in her even, dead voice. So her daughter had realized that she had a mother at last. After all these years, after repaying a mother's kindness by cruelly bunkin' off just at the moment when her earnings, apparently, would have saved that mother from the workhouse, after neglecting her for all that time, after letting her starve, pinch and scrape without contributing as much as a penny piece, her daughter had condescended to show up again.

Sookey broke into *her* conversation as calmly and as ruthlessly: "I know all about that, Old Sookey," she said. "I know you are not my mother, too."

She waited for the result of that bold stroke. Old Sookey remained calm: "Oh, you know that, do yer?" she said, without spleen.

"Yes," said Sookey, trying to make her tone assured.

"C'n prove it, I suppose?"

"It wouldn't be hard."

Old Sookey stared at her for one of her nerve-breaking spells, then her wicked old mouth twisted in a sneer.

"It'd be terrible hard, me gel," she said. "Because I can prove I *am!*"

There was no doubting the assurance in the old woman's voice. It shook Sookey, made her a little sick. That was one part of her dream shattered. . . . The artist mother, the gentle-bred mother who had died at her birth, didn't exist. This abominable old woman remained.

Old Sookey went on with the gusto of deadly relish.

"Yers, I can prove it all right. *Nar* wot do you say?"

Sookey kept a bold face, she said scornfully:

"I say I know you of old, Old Sook. And the facts I've got——"

"Won't do me, gel," jeered Old Sookey. "I got me fac's

better'n you. There's the nursin' 'ome where I lay in—their books is proof. There's the reg'strar. . . ." She stopped short, her eyes glimmered suspiciously. "Wot's yer game, hey?"

Her insistence was breeding a panic in Sookey. Her assurance was toppling. Had she been the victim of a romantic folly? Had she built up an assumption on mere vain pride? Were all her ambitions to come crashing at this moment of triumph?

She faced her mother with hands gripped.

"Who was my father?" she asked.

After a minute of slow, cunning regard, Old Sookey said: "That's *my* affair."

Either something in her manner or an intuitive flash made Sookey say sharply: "I know who he is. His name was Arrian Beeding Gerin, and he is now Lord Fulking."

She almost cried out. Her growing despair was turned to triumph. She saw even in Old Sookey's graven face that she was right; her mother breathed sharply, stared stolidly. "You can't deny it," said Sookey, the ugly side of the business lost in the knowledge that she had been right after all.

"Wot's yer game?" asked Old Sookey.

"That does not matter," said Sookey. "Are you going to give me the evidence I want, or must I get it elsewhere?"

Old Sookey said, with a sudden, black intensity:

"Think I'm going to 'elp a little slut feather 'er nest, with not a penny piece coming my way?"

Sookey knew how to meet that move. She opened her purse, drew some notes out, and held them on her knee.

"I'm willing to pay for information," she said curtly. She was still only thinking of her triumph, of the prospect of coming out on top after all. She knew Old Sookey, she knew what power money had over the old woman. Old

Sookey looked bleakly at the notes: "'Ow much you got there?"

"I can't afford more than twenty pounds," said Sookey.

"You silly little faggot," snarled the other. "A 'undred wouldn't do it."

Sookey would have produced a thousand pounds if needs be, but she knew her mother. Give her mother a hint that she was wealthy, and there would be no end to her blackmailing.

"A hundred is impossible," she said. "I might be able to scrape together a few pounds more, but not easily.

"A 'undred, not a penny less. Fifty now, if you like, an' a promise in writin' fer fifty later."

"I can't do it. Forty at the most——"

"I'll make it ninety. You borrer off Bert; 'e's got plenty."

"I don't borrow from Bert or anyone," said Sookey evenly, and she began to stuff the notes back into her purse. "And you're forgetting that I can get a copy of my birth certificate from Somerset House. That'll be proof enough."

That was not really a shot in the dark; she knew her mother; she guessed that she would not have missed doing anything that gave her a hold over Lord Fulking. Her decision won.

Old Sookey became more reasonable, and ultimately agreed to take seventy-five pounds, twenty now, and the rest within a week, a promise being written out on the hotel paper and signed to that effect.

That settled, and certain that she had squeezed Sookey to the limit, she had not the slightest compunction in telling of her past and Lord Fulking's. The fact that she was certain there was nothing to be got in that direction no doubt helping her.

"You won't get nothin' out o' *'im*," she said, with bitter

relish. " 'E's got the best lawyers in th' land—*they'll* twist yer."

Having enjoyed the prospect of Sookey's twisting, she told the story in matter-of-fact tones, and with more detail than was bearable.

As a young woman she had been a servant in several West End houses. The last of such places was in the Fulkings' London house, where she had been chambermaid. It was in the days of the old lord naturally, and the only son, Arrian Beeding Gerin, the present Lord Fulking, had been then a young man in the early twenties. She had been in her early twenties too, but by then her natural gifts in dubiety had been enhanced by her marriage with the notable scoundrel Frank Pills—a marriage hidden from her unsuspecting employers, who imagined her a single woman.

" 'E was one o' the prim ones," Old Sookey chuckled, referring to Arrian Beeding Gerin. "Always studyin', always proper, always the purfec' li'l gentleman, without sin an' trusted be 'is parents. The real good boy o' the family." Her mouth twisted in a knowing grin, and she went on with gusto: "But when them proper ones tumble, they tumbles 'ard. It's their not being so used ter it as the lively ones. . . . An' they ain't 'arf as fly either."

There was no doubt that the shrewd chambermaid had assessed Arrian Gerin's impressionability, and her already well developed cunning had recognized the value of his not being fly. Sookey had no doubt at all that her mother had deliberately put herself in the way of the young Arrian, and had known how to encourage his appreciation of her beauty. For Old Sookey's beauty had helped a great deal. She had no doubts about the good looks that had been hers as a young woman.

"I was like you, Young Sook, only more striking an' outlandish looking, being all Gyppo. Dark an' sharp like. 'E

called me a 'Barbaric Queen.' There was somethin' abart me that used to get 'old o' men powerful, especially fair men. That young Gerin was gold-fair."

Sookey could imagine the effect of such fierce bizarre, slightly mysterious beauty on the artistic young Arrian, the temperate young Arrian, the reserved and aloof young Arrian. It must have carried him right out of his sedate sphere into glamours of wilder, more barbaric living. And to find that such strange beauty could be his, without fuss, without danger. . . .

That must have been the factor that really betrayed him, the ease, the lack of risk with which the intrigue could be carried on. After the first snatched and willingly surrendered kisses had gone unobserved and undreamed of by anybody else in the great house, the affair developed and went on for months under the very noses of the parents without a hint getting to them, without Arrian Gerin losing a shade of his propriety and reputation for aristocratic uprightness.

The chambermaid had always recognized this was the strength of her position. Arrian Gerin not being a fly one, had valued her for her extreme discretion; not even when the climax came, and he learnt that a child was coming, did he realize that her method was the one best calculated to extract money from one of his type. In his terror of exposure—the exposure of a publicly good young man, which is the most terrible of exposures—he was grateful to her for the way she met all his wishes, and, indeed, strove to aid him in hiding the results of their intrigue.

He was certainly not at all a fly one. In scores of ways—from providing her with money and going with her to find a nursing home for the confinement—he exposed himself to her rather than covered things up, as he thought he was doing by giving the matter personal attention.

Young Sookey was born in a nursing home in West Nor-

wood, and young Arrian Gerin was so ignorant in intrigue, so certain of his mistress, that he accepted her suggestion that she should carry out the details of registration and so on the better to hide the matter. Sookey gave as the name and surname of the father, "Arrian Beeding Gerin," and his rank or profession, "Gentleman."

Arrian did not know of this until after he and Old Sookey had parted. The birth of the child had shocked him back into decorum. His brief midsummer madness was over, never to be repeated. Always conscious of his own position and importance, he realized how terribly he might have risked it if his intrigue had not been with a woman so humble and complaisant as Sookey.

He therefore parted with Old Sookey, having salved her bruised affections with a very solid sum of money—Old Sookey did not give her daughter the figure—and from that day he strove to retrieve his slip—in his own conscience, of course, for nobody else even suspected it—by a more rigorous standard of conduct for the rest of his life.

When Sookey had spent all the money, and wanted more and applied for it, making delicate references to the birth certificate to stimulate generosity, Arrian Gerin's eyes were no doubt opened to her true character. Old Sookey didn't care. She felt she had him in a cleft stick. She had reason to think so until the old lord died and Arrian became Lord Fulking in his place. Sookey, thinking this was an occasion for another even larger payment, was outraged by being confronted by lawyers. Lord Fulking had ceased to be innocent. He had gone to lawyers so well trained in such matters through their connexion with the Best People that they were altogether too much for Sookey. Old Sookey, with fear of a "stretch" for blackmail before her eyes, signed a document stating that all her claims on Lord Fulking had been well and fully met, and from thence on ceased to be on terms of

correspondence with Peers of the Realm. "They're a hot lot, them lawyers; you won't get nothin' outter them, me gel," said Old Sookey, with great satisfaction.

"What was the exact date of my birth?" asked Sookey calmly.

"Twenty-fourth February, 18—, Parish o'——"

"We'll leave that to Somerset House," said Sookey. "Was I registered as Sookey . . . ?"

"Sookey Beeding Lee," grinned Old Sookey. "I wasn't going ter make no mistake abart it. Sookey arter me 'oo was chambermaid in the 'ouse; Beeding arter 'im. . . . The ole fox o' a registrar wanted ter call you Susan, but I wouldn't 'ave that. Not me."

"And you've got some more evidence?" Sookey was remembering the papers Min had spoken of.

"Some papers, a letter from 'im, too, ter me. They're not yors fer that £75, let me tell yer."

"I don't suppose I'll need them. If I do, I must scrape up more money, somehow." She stood up. "Bert will run you home, mother."

"Ain't yer going ter tell me wot yer game is?"

"Better not," Sookey said cynically. "Lawyers, blackmail. You don't want to risk them, do you?"

Old Sookey stared with dark, lowering eyes.

"You're a fly one, you are," she said harshly. "Wot you doin' nar?"

"I'm in a shop," said Sookey.

"Ain't yer going ter tell yer mother?"

"I don't think it would be wise—for both our sakes," said Sookey.

Old Sookey's scowl deepened. She said suddenly out of its blackness: "That's 'im in you gettin' back at me. You got *'is* way, up-in-the-air, cool, contemptshus like. . . . Yor 'is daughter all right."

CHAPTER XXXIII

NEXT day Max came into the shop a few minutes before Sookey left for Somerset House. He was in that mood of forced good humour that verges on sulkiness. He glowered at Sookey's hat:

"Off somewhere, eh?" he said. "Almost seems as though you knew I was coming."

"I didn't," she laughed at him. "I thought we'd agreed not to meet so often just now."

"I'm beginning to see why you wanted that."

"Don't be silly, Max. I don't want it, but it's wiser."

"And in any case we didn't say anything about *never* meeting. I haven't seen you for more than a week."

"Three days, isn't it—or is it two?"

"Darn sight too long, anyhow," he growled. "You'd better come to lunch with me."

"Sorry, Max; this is business."

"I've heard that tale before," his face becoming heavy under his scowl. "Where?"

"In the City."

"All right. I'll run you along in the car."

She shook her head: "Please, Max, don't be tiresome. This job has to be done without—encumbrances."

He did not smile, but tugged sullenly at his fair moustache. Then he said abruptly: "It's the bruiser chap, I take it?"

She was surprised at his knowing about Bert, but, recognizing he was in a bad mood, she said with cool common sense:

"If you mean Bert Tavener—no, it isn't. It isn't anybody."

"You admit you know that feller, though?" he said angrily.

"Of course I do. I've known Bert for years. A rough diamond, but one of the best."

"I don't doubt that. Calls on you pretty often, doesn't he?"

She stopped buttoning her gloves, faced him gravely:

"You've something on your mind, Max. You'd better out with it frankly and save both our tempers." He stood scowling at her, a little intimidated by her calmness and firmness, but still angry. As he did not answer, she went on: "You are connecting Bert Tavener with our meeting less, aren't you?"

"Well, isn't there a connexion?"

"None," she said evenly. "Bert and I see each other about once every three months—even less than that as a rule. It happens he has been helping me over some private business in the last week, and has called more often. After this week I don't suppose I'll see him again for months. Are you satisfied, Max?"

"That's another thing—business. I suppose you won't deny he's the other chap who put up money, the bulk of it, to buy this shop?"

"Why should I deny it? Bert Tavener invested £5,000 in this shop. I'm paying him fifteen per cent. on it, as we agreed. It's a straightforward business deal—nothing more."

He stood scowling.

"Perhaps you're wondering why I went to Bert," she went on. "Well, I knew him in my struggling days—in his, too. He was about the only straight and decent man I met in those days. We helped each other, as good friends should—nothing more, Max. We never will be anything more. You believe that, Max?"

"That's all very well," he mumbled, "but——"

"Don't say it, Max," she said abruptly. "You're in a mood to say something you'd be sorry for afterwards, that I might hate you for. I've been perfectly candid with you, more candid, perhaps, than you've a right to demand, but I want to be with you. Not Bert nor any other man means anything at all to me . . . nothing at all, and I want to hear you say you believe that."

"I don't like this not seeing each other," he said, in a surly tone. "I can't stand it."

"You haven't told me whether you believe me, Max. I'm waiting."

"Oh—well—of course I do, Sue," he said, with an injured air. "Only this not seeing each other is all nonsense. You know it upsets a fellow."

"I know, Max," she smiled. "But I've told you I don't like it either. Hang on a little longer. Things will be better for it in the end."

Standing over her his frown gradually broke.

"Well, that sounds like good news, Sue," he smiled. "And you're an awful little devil. You twist a feller round your finger every time with your perky, pretty way. . . . Now come along out to lunch."

"No," she said. "I've already told you I could not. What a spoilt creature you are! You don't know how to take no."

She thought of that as she went to Somerset House. Max was quite undisciplined where his own satisfaction was concerned. Never in his life, she thought, had he restrained a desire.

This encounter with him turned her thoughts to the thing she was doing; perhaps the churlishness of his mood had made her a little dubious. She had evaded consideration of it, smothered its meaning in action. Now on her way to Somerset House, as she climbed into the little gallery of the search

room, and hunted through the great books where all the births of the land were filed, as she waited for the certificate of her birth to be obtained and typed, she thought of this matter in its relation to her father, Lord Fulking.

It was in a sense an ugly business to expose the one slip of his decorous and decent life, to use that one sin of which he was perhaps more a victim than anything else as a weapon against him. It was ugly to stir up mud, to have to face the sordidness of her own illegitimacy. It was a miserable and wretched business, without glamour or nobility. She was personally sorry about it, and she felt profoundly for her father. She found herself facing it with a gentleness and a repugnance that was not like the old Sookey, the Sookey who was determined to act boldly, firmly, ruthlessly to secure her dominance in the world, to carve out for herself her just place in the great life of the world.

She found that only her need for Max, of marrying him and justifying her ambition carried her on. And even that was supported not by fierce resolve, but by excuses she considered logical.

After all, she was a victim, too; she was the daughter of her father; she had a right to a position through his parentage. Why should she be denied? Why should she the innocent suffer as a consequence of his sin?

Again, she was not going to blackmail him, she was not going to ask him to hurt himself, to do anything outrageous. She was merely going to ask him to enable her to reap the fair reward of her birth, ambition and ability. She was not going to ask him to do anything that was not perfectly justified. . . . But she *was* going to insist on justice.

She must be placed on the same social footing as Max; she must be shown as one worthy of Max. It must be shown that she was one with those who sneered at her. Her instincts, her ambition must be recognized and crowned. She

demanded that as her triumph over this world and as a natural right.

The typed certified copy of her birth certificate on its reddish paper seemed to her a banner of absolute and certain success. The mere sight of it revived her spirits and her confidence.

She could not act for a few days partly because she had to scheme her work ahead, partly because study of Lord Fulking's movements in the society news told her that her best day to see him was the following Tuesday. Max became tiresome again after a blank day, and, after spoiling an evening's work in her flat by his sulks, she agreed to give him an evening.

They dined in one of the new Futuristic restaurants that are all "the thing" to the elect until they become "the thing" to the general public, when both their cooking and their charm vanish in arrogance. Max's sullen disposition thawed rapidly, and by the time they had reached one of the new dance clubs he was in tearing spirits. Both of them were extraordinarily happy until well to the end of supper. Max was anticipating the high old time they would have that week-end at the river house of a certain musical comedy star, to which they were both invited. He took it as a deliberate affront that she refused to go.

She told him that she had arrears of work that must be finished over the week-end. It was true enough, but it was not the only reason. The house they were invited to was notorious for the wildness of its company. Every week there was a rag there that was the joy of a certain type of journalist and the scandal of the proper. These rags were generally common property in the West End by Monday morning, and Sookey knew that it would certainly not help her interview with Lord Fulking to have her name mentioned in connexion with one.

She could not say this to Max, and yet her plea of work had

no effect on him. Her work always did seem nonsense to him; he was annoyed that she should have to do it, and that it should interfere with his plans. He was furious now.

"I'm not going to stand much more of this, Sue," he said angrily. "You try a fellow too far. One of these days I'll have had enough, an' then I won't be such a pleasant fellow. You'll see. . . ."

She could not soothe his bad temper this time, and they parted on those terms. It could not be helped. She did not see him for the rest of the week, and on Monday one of her clients, who had been a guest at the house on the river, told her of the wildness of the week-end, and how Max had been the wildest and most reckless there. He had almost gone too far even for Max Mariven.

What a schoolboy he was, Sookey thought. He had used that party as a safety-valve to work off his anger she knew. She only hoped it would serve to better his mood; she did not like these moods. If so much hadn't depended on him—she did not think further. Max meant everything.

On Tuesday morning the fine car she had ordered came to her flat, and she went down to see Lord Fulking at Gerinsworthy, an hour outside London.

CHAPTER XXXIV

Her good car, her style and her air of breeding impressed the footman. He took her note to Lord Fulking.

It was a short note merely asking for a personal interview. There was nothing threatening about it save the signature. Sookey had signed herself "Sookey Beeding Lee."

The room Sookey waited in indicated Lord Fulking's wealth and taste, and very little else. It was evidently used as a French *salon*. It contained a child study in marble by D'Angers, one of Bosio's nymphs, and a small classical bronze of François Rude. Of the pictures there was rather a nice Ingres in that painter's "Madam Frédéric Reiset" manner, two pastoral subjects by Julien Dupré, a small luminous sketch of Degas, and one showing a Côtes-du-Nord interior of Chardin; it was a beautiful and severe room, making no concession whatsoever to modern taste. Sookey liked its austerity, though when she saw the pictures she did have a faint and romantic hope that one might be a copy of the Gainsborough "Lady Anne Gerin." To stand under that, to mark her family resemblance to that, would give a dramatic force to her presence.

There was, however, to be nothing dramatic about this business, and having let her romantic fancy play for a moment she was glad it was to be so.

There was little that was dramatic about Lord Fulking, or romantic. He did not look the great aristocrat—wicked or otherwise.

He was not as tall as herself, was flaccidly built, and was inclined towards a neat shabbishness in dress. He looked neither unkind, stern, nor impressive, but a little worried and

fussy. He might indeed have been a master-builder called away from a meal by an urgent message about somebody's drains. His eyes, however, were steady, and his nose was really good, long, straight, thin, and sensitive, while his hands were surprisingly strong and shapely.

He shut the door carefully behind him, stood examining her with a little frown; then he walked closer, placed her letter on the top of a Louis XV tulip wood table between them, and looked at her as though as to say: "The duel is opened."

"I don't think I have to explain myself," Sookey said. She had meant to add "Father," but found that beyond her.

He answered in a worried voice: "You have come from your mother?"

"No," said Sookey. "This has nothing to do with my mother." She saw he did not believe her. "I made the discovery myself accidentally. My mother supplied me with facts—no more. I have lived apart from my mother, and kept my address hidden from her for the past five or six years."

He said testily, as though he had not listened: "My lawyers deal with this sort of thing. You should have gone to them. You should not have come here."

"I did not come here to blackmail my father," she said evenly.

His lips tightened at that and his face seemed to grow remote and hard. She realized why he deserved his reputation for severity and propriety. He said uncompromisingly: "I can discuss nothing. You must see my lawyers."

"I do not wish to see lawyers," she said. "I have rights; one of them is the right to meet and talk to my father."

He did not wince, but he said fussily: "I admit nothing . . . nothing. My lawyers are the proper people to see. I cannot——"

"I will *not* see your lawyers," she said, so firmly that he stopped and stared at her. "What I have to say is entirely between you and me. And my purpose is not blackmail."

He made a curious flicking motion of irritation and loss with both hands.

"But you are here, though."

"But not to threaten."

He took a quick, flinging step towards one of the Dupré pictures as though it was hanging crooked and he meant to straighten it. Before the stride was completed he swung sharply on her, and with another burst of irritable fussiness cried: "I don't know you. I don't know *who* you are. You might be anybody—anybody. . . ."

"I have proofs here," said Sookey, opening her purse and looking straight at him. "Do you *need* them?"

His lips tucked themselves in and his eyes dropped before hers. Suddenly a red patch appeared on each cheek and the word, "Unbearable! Unbearable!" seemed to burst a way out of him.

He was thinking entirely of himself, and the interview would be hopeless until he stopped thinking entirely of himself. Sookey said severely: "I have had a good deal more than this to bear, father."

He flushed very deeply, then, after a moment, gave her a stiff little bow: "I sincerely beg your pardon," he said, with stiff courtesy. "Will you sit down? Will you tell me what you want?"

The real breeding came out then. He handed her a chair as though she were a princess; his manner was impeccable, and his attention absolute.

Sookey told him that to explain why she had come she would have to tell him briefly of her life. She sketched her early days in Cherry Pie Gardens to prove that from the beginning her instincts were of her father's, not her mother's

class. His interest was acute. He asked questions: "What is Cherry Pie Gardens?" He heard her description with disgust and astonishment—and she was the cause of the astonishment. His eyes swept over her, her sharp beauty, her distinction, the perfection of her clothes. "You came from that," he said in amaze. "I wasn't *of* it," she said pointedly; "my instincts were not of it."

She saw that he took the point. He flushed a little, coughed nervously—but was pleased. She could almost hear him saying to himself, "Ah, blood will out."

When she told of Old Sookey's plans for her, left him in no doubt as to their meaning, his handkerchief came out, and he ran it over lips and forehead. And he could not meet her eyes. He was alert when she spoke of her love of colour and design, and of Bede O'Gara's discovery and his training of what he considered an exceptional talent.

"Strange," said her father. "Strange that that should appear—very remarkable."

"I didn't get that instinct from my mother," said Sookey boldly; and though Lord Fulking avoided her eye, his manner showed that he was perfectly aware from whom she had that instinct. And then, as he listened absorbed, to the triumph of her talent at "Poppée's," he suddenly burst out: "But you must be this Sue Lee, then."

For the first time in the interview Sookey was indecisive. What was his feeling for Sue Lee—admiration or detestation? But she had to say it.

"Yes, I'm Sue Lee."

He was lost for a moment in astonishment. Then he cried: "But this is astonishing. . . . You are a remarkable young woman. I have seen that suite of rooms you designed for the Rushpers—admirable. . . . A new sense of values in decoration. That play you schemed, too—quite extraordinary. Quite! There is a gesture, a bravura, in the bold

massing and blending of tone that is—well, remarkably like a touch of genius. But I like your domestic decoration better. Much! You've struck out an original line there. . . . Nothing like an imitation of the Berlinese or Austrian applied art . . . a native note of distinction. . . ."

His love of beautiful things, of art, was an obsession. It rode him even at so trying a moment as this. He was off at once on great periods of decoration, the tapestried schemes of mediæval times, the Italianate schools, the inlay of Boulle, the great *floraison* of taste that developed in the eighteenth century. His language was a little stilted and old-fashioned, Sookey thought, but his knowledge was immense and his discrimination unerring. Most of the names he flung out in the white heat of his interest—Riesener, Shearer, Rottière, Chippendale, Gouthière, Sheraton, Hepplewhite, Adams—were quite unknown to her, for she had not studied the history of her craft, and perhaps, while being impressed, she was also a little amused at his sudden betrayal by an enthusiasm at such a moment. Lord Fulking gradually came to realize it too. He pulled up. He utilized her dress styles as a means to the astringency of the moment. He said pontifically:

"But I don't like your dresses. No! Some of them are undoubtedly beautiful, show a profound mastery in colour arrangement. But on the whole—no, I do not like them. They are part of our modern tendency towards looseness. They pander to the baser instincts . . . they . . ."

He flushed red again. This talk of morality was not quite tactful at the moment. There was a pause of some uneasiness. Lord Fulking said: "So you have become Sue Lee, a young woman of some importance. . . . And artist. . . . That finishes your story . . . ?"

"I wanted to make you feel that I have made good," said Sookey quietly.

"Indeed you have," he said. "Yes, indeed! A remark-

able career, my dear—er—my dear young lady. To overcome—er—such obstacles as you have, and to rise as you have is a remarkable achievement. It shows that—ahhm—force of character will out. If you will allow me to say quite sincerely, one is—I am quite genuinely proud of you, my dear." He paused and said uneasily; he was not yet sure about her: "And you must be a rich woman, too."

She knew that he was still fearful of blackmail; she relieved that fear: "I have enough. If I sold my shop I should be worth from twenty to twenty-five thousand pounds."

He stood silent, and his eyes asked: "Why are you here, then?"

"You are wondering why I have sought you out," she said slowly; and, as he bowed, "It is not a matter easily put. I don't want recognition as your daughter. That would be impossible and unfair to you. But I *do* want recognition."

"How—recognition?" he asked cautiously.

"I want to take a place in your world, a place that would have been my natural right as your daughter. I am in or on the fringes of that world now—but not of it. I want to be of it. I want to regain the status I lost by the accident of my birth."

"I fear you do not realize the obstacles, the impossibility of such a thing."

"Am I not presentable?"

"You are quite presentable, my dear, but——"

"The shop?"

"That is, I think, an insuperable obstacle. Whatever your gifts and charm, you are still Sue Lee—who came out of a shop."

"The shop can be closed," she said quietly; "and, sponsored by you, my past would be forgotten."

"By me!" he gasped. "It is unthinkable."

"Introduced by you," she said, "I would be accepted anywhere."

"The circumstances of your—er—birth make it impossible for me——" He gulped and stopped. He saw that that was double-edged. He saw in Sookey's assured manner that she thought that the circumstances of her birth gave her reason —and means to insist on introductions from him.

"You *must* see it is impossible," he cried.

"I can see no other possible way," she said. "I have set this as an ambition to justify myself, father, and I count on you to do me this service for whatever disservice you did me. I don't want to hurt you in any way, or to expose your secret. Surely there is a way to manage a matter like this without doing harm? For instance, you might, since you are so well known as a devotee to art, 'discover' me as a new note in British decorative art. Better, I might be the daughter of a relative or a dear friend, a girl whose father died abroad in, perhaps, America, and who came to England. . . . An independent girl who had introductions to you, but who was determined to put her genius to the proof before seeing you. I have proved my talents as Sue Lee. I am satisfied. I have come to you. You make the discovery that the famous Sue Lee is none other than the daughter of a man or a woman you knew in your youth. You take her up and introduce her as such."

"The idea is preposterous," he cried. "Don't you see that the deception would be discovered at once?"

"No. The papers are full of cases of nobodies who have posed as people of title, and have been received as such even by your class. And there will be no deception here." She drew herself up. "I am, after all, a Gerin."

Again he made that queer flicking gesture of his hands.

"The thing's preposterous. You are out of your senses, girl, to suggest it. It's unthinkable."

"It is simplicity itself," she said firmly. "Who will even question anyone you vouch for?"

He cried out angrily: "I won't do it. No, I won't. Apart from—from the indecency of the thing, look at the danger to me."

"This way you will avoid danger," said Sookey quietly.

"I will see my lawyers," he cried, rising and frowning at her. "No, I will not discuss it; I will see my lawyers. I am sorry for you, deeply sorry; but I cannot undo the past, and I will not be intimidated by it—you must say what you have to say to my lawyers."

"I am not going to your lawyers," said Sookey.

He seemed to back away from her, gave a little exclamation, as though recognizing he was facing a will too strong for him.

"You are threatening me?" he cried.

"I don't want to threaten you. I did not come here to threaten you. I expected you to be willing to help me. If you won't, then I must find my own way."

He had difficulty in speaking; at length he said hoarsely: "My lawyers will deal with you, madam."

"Not even your lawyers can overcome the fact of my birth," she said. "They cannot stop me using the name Gerin—it is as much mine as the name of Lee—or declaring that I am your daughter."

His face went white with fury and despair. He could see that she would not hesitate to use her right, and that a past unsuspected in him would come to light. He saw the effect of it. He who was supposed to be the model to his rank in morality and propriety would be exposed as a liar and a Pharisee. What a shattering of an idol it would be, what a howl would go up! His mind sickened at the calamity.

"Have you no shame?" he cried. "This is infamous and disgusting."

"Did *I* make it so?" she said passionately. "Am I the sinner or the victim? Did I beget myself, with all my instincts and desires? And have you given me one reason for showing you consideration? Have you ever given me one thought? Have you ever stirred a hand to help me escape from the gutter to which you condemned me, which your blood should have taught you *our* blood would abominate? Even now, when I am doing my best to make it easy, do you consider me? I am to be kept under to save you. . . . Well, I will not be kept under. In spite of you I have risen, in spite of you I will take what I mean to take. I owe you nothing; it is you who owe."

"That is that fiend of a gipsy speaking," he cried.

"It is the Gerin in me speaking," she said scornfully. "The Gerin that has always looked after itself—and knows how to *now*."

He went away to a window, stared out of it for many minutes. He came back coldly.

"You can prove you are not an impostor?" he said, in a level voice.

She took her birth certificate from her purse.

"In addition to this my mother has letters which can be bought at a price. I will buy them. But I do not think it wise to excite her curiosity."

He was almost humanly:

"Yes, that is true. You are thoughtful. I see that. . . . It is a great shock; you must forgive my attitude. I recognize I owe you something. . . . But it is not easy."

Sookey was touched. There was a real nobility underneath his concentration on self. There was something in herself that could appreciate and respond to it. . . . That something that made her attitude to Paul Geneste so baffling. She said: "I do want to make it as easy as I can. . . . I am not an enemy, father." She made suggestions. She wanted to be

asked to the exclusive functions at his London house. She wanted to be a guest at his house parties, the house parties that the Smart Set smiled at and would break practically any engagement to join. Such invitations would be enough to establish her.

He began to show more animation, more relief:

"Yes, yes, it might not be so difficult, after all. You really have a remarkable talent; you are, in your own sphere, a great artist. . . . I have always been interested in art development. Yes, that does show us a reasonable way." He thought. "There is to be some Chamber Music in the London house next Monday. We are introducing a Polish string quartette to London. I will send you an invitation for that. Talk to my wife. She has been talking of re-decorating the rooms of this house in a more modern style. She will take to you; she is more mundane than I. . . . It should be easy to ask you down here for the week-end after that. We are having a small party. . . . You are not frightened of Cabinet Ministers and serious members of the House of Lords? No. . . . You can come down just to look over the rooms and give your opinion. That should lead to other things; we will discuss the future when you come down. . . . As you say, you only have to appear intimately among us, and a great deal should follow. Yes, it should not be so difficult. Do you agree?"

Sookey agreed. It was all she wanted, and she thanked him. She only asked one thing further. She asked if it would be possible to invite Lord Mariven to the house party at which she would be a guest.

"Mariven!" His lips pursed in the manner of a reproving schoolmaster; he shot a look at her. "You know Mariven?"

"Very well," she answered.

"Is there a particular reason behind this?"

"I think he would marry me if he felt I was accepted by the right people."

"Marry you?" he frowned. "Do you know——" His lips tightened. "Very well; Mariven shall come."

Max would come, Max would see her on terms of equality with his own exclusive set. There was no doubt about it; Lord Fulking would ask him, and he would come. Lord Fulking did not even contemplate his refusal—he knew his power.

And Lord Fulking said on parting: "You are a remarkable girl—remarkable." He gave her a wintery little smile. "You've beaten me. . . . You're certainly more—you're certainly a Gerin. And very lovely, too, my dear. . . . Will you forget and forgive that bad past?"

Sookey kissed him.

All the way home she could think of only one thing: she had won. She had come out on top. She had come into her own. She had no doubt about it. Max had said he was fond of her. Max had said he wanted to marry her, only their stations forbade it. That obstacle had been removed. Max would marry her. Her triumph was assured.

CHAPTER XXXV

She spent the rest of that day and all the next in an exhilaration of happiness and triumph.

She had come out on top. She, Sookey of Cherry Pie Gardens, had justified herself and her ambitions. All the boasts she had uttered to Paul Geneste and Bert had come true. She had fought her way through to the great life. She had proved her right to stand equal with the great ones of the earth.

She was at the summit. She was not merely in the glittering, lordly, arrogant life; she was to be of it. Lord Fulking's interest would assure her position and the respect of even those who had sneered at her; marriage to Max would make that status unassailable. Those women who had laughed at the pretensions of a little nobody, a shop-girl, would laugh no more. Her position, her invitations, her friendship, her opinion would be too important.

She was on the summit—life with all its glories would be hers from now on. Her success was absolute.

She saw nothing of Max during that day. Someone told her that he had been behaving with extravagant wildness the night before. He was behaving like a spoilt child in his pique. . . . Well, that would soon be all over now. She smiled again when she thought of what Max's face would be like when he discovered her as a fellow-guest of the Fulkings. She would keep that a secret. It would be a joyful surprise for him.

She was very busy that day and the next. She entered at once on the delicate business of ridding herself of the shop and its connexion. She was almost ready to shut it up at

once, but that would not do. Not only must she consider her employees, but she must not damage the chances of her successor to carry on. Besides, there was the matter of the goodwill and the lease she had been able to renew. She was ready to cut out this part of her life in tacit agreement with Lord Fulking's attitude towards trade, but the money would be valuable in the life she was to enter—even when she married Max, who was a rich man.

On the morning of the next day she had a surprise telephone call from Paul. She had had no communication with him since their quarrel, and possibly that should have affected her attitude towards him now. It did not. Her sense of happiness and triumph was all-complete, all-embracing, and it tinged her relations with everybody. Also Paul's voice no longer sounded strained or sullen; there was a note in it that recalled the old Paul. He wanted to see her that day—it was rather important—but could not come to lunch or dinner because he had already fixed up. She told him that she would be in her flat all that evening, and he agreed to come about half-past nine—directly he could get away.

She found herself thinking a great deal about Paul, thinking too much about him, feeling too decidedly upset that he should have sold his career for the sake of a smart reputation. She felt, somehow, that that was a barrier between them.

During the morning she tactfully thinned out her appointments for the future so that the change of management in the shop could come about without too much friction. After lunch she spent half an hour with an agent who was already in negotiation with three likely purchasers.

As she was crossing Bond Street to get back to her shop Max passed her in his car. He had with him a fluffy girl of that grin-and-bear-garden guild proper to certain primary ranks of the chorus. Max stared at Sookey in a sullen, uncertain way, and when she smiled and nodded happily he

promptly shot his car perilously across the traffic to the pavement edge, and, paying not the slightest attention to the fluffy girl, scrambled out and came towards Sookey. Sookey saw that wine must have been a considerable item of his luncheon bill, even though he could not be said to be the worse for it.

He said: "You look as jolly as a sunny day, Sue. Feeling happy?"

"Very," she smiled.

"Going to share any of it?" he asked, eager and sullen.

"Well, isn't it happening now?" she laughed at him.

"You are a sight for sore eyes," he said. "There's no one quite like you, Sue. . . . What I mean is, have you got over this rotten hold-off and don't-meet wheeze?"

"Almost," she smiled. "We'll soon be back on the old footing, Max."

"Soon——" he said eagerly. "Why wait? Hop into the car now, and we'll have tea at Ranelagh."

"My dear Max, what about your poor passenger?"

"Oh, we'll soon bundle her out," he said contemptuously. "Will you come?"

"Not to-day, Max."

"When?"

"Soon," she said. "Very soon."

"You're having me on a string again," he said angrily. "Why be such a pig when you're made to be nice to people?"

"I will be nice—very soon."

"You mean it?" he cried greedily. "When, Sue? Don't tantalize a chap."

"I don't want to, Max," she said curiously. "Just wait a little—less than two weeks."

"Two weeks. . . . Oh, Lord, it's your old game again. . . . I'm fed up."

"Don't be such a child, Max," she said. "Can't you wait a few days?"

"That's a promise," he said sulkily.

"It's a promise, Max."

"I don't know whether I believe you or not," he said. "You're such a little devil. . . . Why wait? Why not be decent now?"

"You'll see the reason when the time comes."

"But two weeks—darn it all, you expect too much from a fellow. I'm not a puppy on a chain, you know."

"Don't be silly, Max. Can't you have patience for a little while? It will mean so much more happiness all round if you do."

Max went off half convinced, half sullen. Sookey felt sorry for him. He was very much in love with her, there was no doubt, and, like a spoilt boy, could only think of the pleasure he gained from being with her. He seemed to have no thought for the future, or of what sort of end his feelings must come to. She saw that she would have to think for Max a great deal in the future, perhaps have to mould him not a little. He was a dear fellow, and very handsome and good-hearted; he'd be a fine man with a little discipline.

She dined alone, and after told her servant that she was expecting someone to call, and that he should be shown into the drawing-room at once.

A little before nine the door of the drawing-room opened, but it was not Paul. It was the maid bringing the evening post.

One of the envelopes contained the formal invitation to the musical evening at the Fulking's house in Hertford Square. The mere sight of the austere and formal card gave Sookey a thrill. It was the gage of her triumph, the first signal of the glorious life that was opening before her. It seemed to her that its arrival to-day was of peculiar omen. To-day was the day when she had practically bound herself to Max. This evening Paul was coming, and it seemed the

happiest augury that this first step to her greater life should be accomplished almost before the eyes of the man to whom she had boasted that one day she should take that step.

She broke one of her rules and placed the card on her severely simple mantel, against the beautiful Etruscan vase which was the only ornament allowed on it. From where she sat under the softly shaded light the card shone at her every time she looked up from her book. While she was talking to Paul it would be always before her eyes—a flag of victory.

But it was not Paul who came in when the door was opened again. It was Max, who thrust it open with something of a swagger, who shut it, and came in.

His manner was possessive, and was meant, she saw, to appear possessive. There was an air of truculence about him. The wine at his lunch had most definitely not been the limit of his drinking. His walk had that slight blurring that, with the slight blurring of speech, betokens intoxication.

She cried: "Max! What are you doing here? I didn't expect you. How did you get in?"

But she knew how he had got in. She had not mentioned the name of her visitor, and her servant must have thought it was Max.

He neither listened nor answered her question. He came straight towards her.

"All this nonsense is finished," he said in his thick, blurred voice. "I'm not having any more of it. I'm here to stay."

She had risen. Before she realized his intention, he caught her by the shoulders, was holding her body cruelly against his body, was kissing her.

"Max!" she cried; "Max, don't! . . ."

"Shut up," he snarled thickly. "I warned you I'd take the matter into my own hands one day. This is the day."

"Max!" she cried, and her physical revolt was extraordinary, "do you want to spoil everything?"

"You belong to me," he said thickly. "We're going to have no more nonsense."

She struggled, crying out pleadingly. He held her almost contemptuously with his great strength, leering down with a sulky triumph, deliberately kissing and kissing. When she wrenched her lips, her face out of his reach, he laughed sardonically. His fingers caught the shoulder of her evening gown, ripped it away from shoulder to breast. He laughed again, a horrible, gloating laugh. "What a skin you've got, Sue," he said; and she felt the dank heat of his lips on throat and shoulder. . . . The alley-cat in her swept in a gust of fury through her. Her fist and her fingers slashed at his face. "You little vixen!" he cried, and loosed her to defend his eyes.

She stood panting, furious, holding her tattered garment across her breasts. "You beast!" she cried. "You filthy beast!"

He stood lowering and leering: "You needn't keep it up," he said loftily, truculently. "I don't mean to be put off this time."

"I hate you," she cried. "You've spoilt everything."

"Don't talk like a little fool. What are you giving yourself airs over . . . ? You and your talk about two weeks. Well, I can't wait. . . . Damn it all, I'm the person who lays down the law. And I say it's *now*. . . ."

She was beginning to fear, beginning to understand.

"Go away," she cried. "I'm beginning to loath you. I wouldn't marry you . . ."

His clap of laughter pulled her up. He was looking at her as though she was trying some joke or was not quite in her senses.

"Marry you!" he cried. "Marry you! Ain't you getting a little above yourself, Sue?"

"Weren't you thinking of marrying me?" she said out of a dry throat.

"Oh, don't be a little fool, Sue," he snapped irritably.

"Weren't you?" she said, with a cold, growing anger. "When you said you would marry me if you could. . . ."

"*You* know what I meant," he said, with weary disgust. "All part of the game. . . . I'm a sport, if you like to play it that way, why I naturally play up."

"And all the time you thought I was 'playing up' to be your mistress," she cried, with a half hysterical laugh.

"You know what it was to be," he said contemptuously. "You're not a fool. My sort don't marry your sort. You know that well enough. Hang it all, you know what you are and what I am. It's not done, Sue. You know it better than anybody."

She faced him with a cold fury for half a minute. She motioned towards the door. "Go," she said. He stood scowling back at her, so she moved towards the bell.

He stepped between her and the bell, caught her wrist.

"You're damwell not going to get out of things like that," he said thickly. "You can't play fast and loose with me like this. I've about put up with all I can stand. If you think you can take everything and give nothing in return . . ."

"Take?" she said coldly. "What have I taken from you?"

"I like that," he jeered. "Why, Poppy never made half as much trouble for the £2,000 I gave her. . . ."

"I see," she said, not even trying to free her wrist. "And you think I ought to be a £1,000 more complaisant than Poppy. Well, I deal in cash only to make cash returns—

my sort does. I'll send you a cheque for £3,000 to-morrow —unless you'd like to wait while I write it now."

He was stung to red rage.

"You little hell-cat," he cried; his lips twisted savagely. "I suppose you find the bruiser more to your style and taste, and his money easier."

"I think you are the filthiest and most ignoble thing I have ever met," she said quietly. She wrenched her hand away from him and went towards the bell.

But the man had worked himself up into one of his blind, berserker furies. He snatched at her wrist before she could touch the bell. He twisted her arm so savagely that she was bent double and unable to cry out. He pushed her towards the great divan, and she heard him snarling that she wouldn't trick him; she'd played with him too far. "If that's your game, you little slut," he snarled, "then I'll damwell teach you who's your master. . . ."

She tried to cry out. He struck her over the mouth. And at the blow and at the words she had the horrible realization that all this had happened before, with another, viler man. . . . Only, *was* he viler? . . . She was near the great divan. If nobody heard them. If nobody came. . . .

But somebody had heard. Progress ceased. She became aware of the shadow of an extra presence. She heard a voice commanding Lord Mariven to stop his blackguardery. Somebody with a powerful arm yanked Max away, and she fell against the divan.

She saw Max turn and rush at the new-comer, Max's wild blow, and the cool and deadly slash of the other's fist. Max went down in a heap against a chair. He rose and rushed again, and again the fist slashed, and Max remained on the floor a perceptible time, feeling softly at his face that had become red and twisted. At the third blow he remained in

a crouching heap against the wall, his elbow up to guard the blows that the terror in his eyes anticipated.

The voice of the new-comer said: "Get up, you cur, and get out of here."

Max got up like a cur, slid from the room like a cur.

Paul Geneste was standing over her. Paul Geneste was looking down at her, white-faced but whimsical. He said in a slightly panting voice:

"All right now, Sookey . . . and—and all this seems to have happened before. . . ."

"It's 'Erbert—Herbert Young all over again," she cried. And then she began to sob. "The whole world's rotten—rotten, Paul."

CHAPTER XXXVI

"Yes," agreed Paul, "the world's rotten in the main. Rotten because men haven't enough to do to keep clean, rotten because they are false to themselves, rotten because they haven't the faith or fineness, courage or ideals to lift themselves above easy greed and falsity, lust and undiscipline.

"It's all rotten, Paul," insisted Sookey. "I've known it in my heart all the time, and I've only let my eyes see it now."

"It's not all rotten, my dear," he smiled. "A lot of it is —being rotten is so easy. Most people haven't got it in 'em to resist their appetites. Being rotten is the line of least resistance. . . . But there is good timber among the weeds; all the quiet good work going on without glamour, without reward." He smiled. "Does that sound ill coming from me, Sookey? But I've thrown over Harley Street."

She sat up straight, stared at him over her damp handkerchief.

"Paul," she cried. "Research?"

"That's what I wanted to see you about," he smiled. "I've come to my senses—or is it yours, Sookey? I start out to-morrow for the country to hunt for a house where I can begin research work again."

"Oh, Paul," she cried, "that's splendid news!"

"Queer that you should be the one to say that, Sookey. Yet I expected you would. . . . That was why it seemed absolutely necessary to come round and tell you first. Our lives seem strangely mixed together, my dear."

"I believe they were meant to be," she said slowly. "We're —we're meant to show each other that what seems the right way isn't right for us. This silly ambition of mine. . . . I

believe a desire to show you what I could do was at the bottom of it."

"And going into Harley Street was my desire to show you what I could do in your material ambition," he said. His breath caught at the implication, and he looked quickly at her, who was now calm and smiling at him. "But—but we're forgetting this fellow Mariven," he said hoarsely.

"He was nothing but a figurehead," she said quietly. "That's always been perfectly plain at least. He was to be the crown of my ambition, the natural symbol of the great and glittering life I craved—the great and rotten life. He was a better figurehead than I thought. He is a striking example of that life's rottenness."

"I tried to hint he was a bad-hat, Sookey," said Paul, watching her anxiously.

"So did Bert," she said. "So did my common sense, I think. . . . But I was just determined not to listen. People won't, you know, when advice interferes with their dreams. I thought his sort meant everything, and through him I would get everything." Her eyes watched Paul's face closely. "I planned to marry him." She saw the pain pass over his face. "And now I'm glad he was too rotten to think me worth it."

"You were in love with him?" he asked huskily.

"No. I was in love with myself, the things I had made myself—in that phase." Suddenly she saw the Fulkings' invitation; she rose swiftly, went across to the mantelpiece and tore the card to pieces.

"What's that?" he asked, watching her.

"That's the end of the phase. This meant the victory of Sue Lee, climber. It was to be her means of admission among the great ones of the earth. That"—she held up the torn fragments and tossed them into the hearth—"is the end of that material little baggage. The birth of plain Sookey Lee, woman—and anxious to begin again, too, Paul."

He stood gripping the back of a chair, face pale, eyes fiercely on hers.

"Sookey," he said, "does that mean——"

"Take me with you to-morrow, Paul. I want to begin again, too. . . ."

"I can't," he said slowly, "unless . . . You see, I'm in love with you, Sookey—always have been. I can't take you unless you are in love with me."

"That's—that's my right ambition, Paul," she said softly. "I've always known it underneath. . . . And I feel I can make a real success of it this time."

THE END